

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

March 3, 2019

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*The Witness of the Mountaintop and the Valley*

*In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He shrieks and drools, and his eyes — wide-open, feral — sees nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and Jesus's disciples wring their hands in embarrassment. "Frauds!" someone yells into the night. "Where's your Master? Why has he left you?" "We don't know," the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Fear wars with exhaustion as they watch the boy claw at his own face. A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night. "This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the child against his chest. "Please," he sobs to the stars. "Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him."*

These are the words of the Rev. Debie Thomas, who was introduced to us by Deacon Pat in her sermon last Sunday. She is imagining what might be happening in the valley before Jesus and his three friends descend. While Peter, James and John are having a mountaintop experience with their Teacher, the disciples in the valley are experiencing something altogether different. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story of the Transfiguration, underscoring its importance, and all three end their accounts with the narrative of the boy suffering from seizures whom the other disciples cannot heal. And even though our lectionary has paired these two stories, we tend to overlook what happens in the valley below, only highlighting the miraculous mountaintop experience. Maybe it's because as we prepare to end the season of Epiphany, caught up in the wonder of the star, the dove, the jugs of water turned into wine and the enormous catch of fish, like Peter we want to linger in the glory a little while longer before embarking yet again on our Lenten journey with Jesus to the cross. Maybe we are drawn to the mountaintop as an escape from the messiness of the valley below. Maybe we need a little time basking in the light, marveling in its beauty and power to dispel the darkness. At this moment I'm more moved by the story in the valley where most of life happens.

I wonder if those at the base of the mountain knew anything of what was occurring above. Did they experience a glimmer of the transformative light that emanated from Jesus? Did they glimpse the frightening cloud that overwhelmed Peter, James, and John? Could they hear a faint sound coming from its peak when God spoke of his Chosen One? We don't know. Like the Rev. Debie Thomas we can only imagine. What we do know is that at its base a child is in agony and his father in desperation to free his child from his suffering. The nine who were not lucky enough to get to climb the mountain with their Teacher spend an evening in utter futility and hopelessness as they could do nothing for this child. What we know is that some people who needed Jesus that night experienced the agony of his absence, while a few basked in his glory.

I also wonder about Jesus when he entered the heartache and pain of this moment. His response to the crowd and to the disciples is not very kind. Imagine him leaving the mountain all aglow knowing that the journey which lay ahead included his own suffering. He is not even given a moment to pause. To breathe. To pray. Instead he is thrust into the suffering of the world. Did he choose to lash out due to his weariness, frustration and need to cry out for a break? We don't know what Jesus was feeling or thinking. What we do know is that he didn't walk away from this father's anguished plea. He didn't walk away from the darkness. He entered fully into the suffering and healing occurred.

The two stories, side by side, unapologetically illustrate the world in which we live and move and have our being. The truth they offer is that while one of us is sitting in these pews basking in the glow of our communal worship and music, another is sitting here feeling totally alone, unable to focus on the experience because of the pain they are enduring. Many of us don't have to think twice about where our next meal is coming from while our food pantry is emptied on a weekly basis because our neighbors are hungry. If we consider this from a bigger picture, the same holds true. We dwell in relative comfort and safety while our sisters and brothers to the South are risking their lives and their children's lives to get into our country because they are fleeing persecution and violence. Do we not at the same time experience valleys particular to Western contemporary life that is often "filled with isolation, anxiety, and busyness" - while many who live in material scarcity enjoy more time to be nourished by relationships, valuing community life in ways we have forgotten? "Here's the great

challenge to the Christian life, the great challenge to the Church: can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory," writes the Rev. Debie Thomas? "Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other - denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard work out of love and compassion for each other, so that *no one* among us - not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one - is ever abandoned or forgotten? Yes, Jesus came down from the mountain. Yes, he healed the desperately sick boy. But let's not forget the suffering that came first. Let's not flatten the story to give our religion neat lines and soft edges. The suffering was real, and it deserves honest witness. After all, the cry of that human father, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!' is the most authentic and powerful description of the Christian life I know. He didn't find that testimony on a mountaintop; he forged it in the valley of his son's pain."

I am reading *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* which chronicles a visit between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, two of the greatest spiritual leaders of our generation. They have survived more than fifty years of exile and the violence of oppression from their respective homelands. Despite these hardships, or, as they would say, because of them—they are two of the most joyful people on our planet. In 2015, Archbishop Tutu traveled to the Dalai Lama's home in India, to celebrate His Holiness's eightieth birthday and to create what they intended would be a gift for others. They looked back on their lives to answer a single burning question: How do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering? One of the Archbishop's insights is this: 'Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.'

In the midst of life, there is death. In the midst of joy, there is suffering. Both are true to the human experience and deserve honest witness. Healing and transformation occur when we are willing to enter into the fullness of human suffering and human joy. Our own. And that of our sisters and brothers. Jesus came to reveal this truth so that it may set us free. As we travel together on our Lenten journey, some of us may cry out in glorious jubilation while others in heartbreaking agony. *Both* voices need the freedom to speak, teaching us about life and faith. *Both* are beloved of God. May we have the

courage to hold them alongside of each other with loving attention and deep compassion. *Amen.*