

## **It is good for us to be here**

When I was in seminary, I had the opportunity to take several courses in homiletics. My favorite was the one taught by the Rev. Troy Bronner, a pastor in the Black Church tradition. Troy had graduated from that same seminary only a couple years and was serving a church nearby. But he was such a remarkable preacher, he was asked to come back and offer a class on preaching each semester. He also preached a few times a year at the seminary. I have heard a number of great preachers in my life, both locally and nationally. I would still rank Troy among the very best. His sermons were inspiring, thoughtful, passionate, challenging, encouraging.

Troy was also a gifted and brilliant teacher. Although his background was in the Black Baptist Church, he had a way of encouraging everyone in the class to develop and trust their own experience and gifts for preaching, even a white Episcopalian from Utah like me. On the last day of class, Troy gave each of the students a small, polished stone. He handed one to each of us, looking us in the eye and saying, "You are a preacher." He meant it, and coming from Pastor Bronner, that meant everything. I carried that brown and tan stone in my pocket with me for years, especially on Sundays when I would preach. It now sits on my desk at home, where I can see it daily. I don't believe the stone is magic; it doesn't confer any special powers or help me write sermons in half the time (wouldn't that be nice!), but it is a reminder of that experience, and that faithful preacher and pastor, Troy Bronner.

We like to have reminders of powerful events and important people from our lives. We pick up a shell from the beach that reminds us of that place. Or a brilliant red leaf from a walk in the autumn. Or we buy a souvenir from a trip to New York or London. We want to remember that we were there and have something concrete to mark the event.

Many years ago, I visited the Holy Land, and one of the memorable sites we visited was Mt. Tabor. It is also called the Mount of the Transfiguration, for many believe that it was there that the event took place that we heard about this morning.

The transfiguration takes place at a pivotal time in Gospel according to Mark. Jesus had been very active – traveling, proclaiming the good news, teaching, and healing. And then, at the very center of Mark's gospel, Peter and the disciples finally

recognize and name Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Immediately, Jesus tells them about the way of the cross that he must go. From that moment onward, Jesus begins moving toward Jerusalem, toward his passion and crucifixion. It is about six days after that that Jesus took with him a small group of disciples, Peter, James, and John. And they went up on this great mountain, apart, by themselves. Quite possibly it was Mt. Tabor.

While on this mountain, this glorious event, the transfiguration, occurred. Jesus' very appearance changes, his clothes become dazzling white. Suddenly, the disciples see the appearance of two figures: Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah represent the fulfillment of all that has taken place up to now. The lawgiver Moses and the great prophet Elijah, both of whom had powerful mountaintop revelations themselves. Here, for the disciples to witness, are the law and the prophets. And they are talking with Jesus. Jesus, who has been revealed as the long-awaited for Messiah. On this mountaintop is the fulfillment of what had been and what was being fulfilled.

What a revelation, and there was glory shining all around them. Peter, God bless him, gives a wonderfully human response. Amazed, and even a bit frightened, Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, or three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Mark writes that Peter uttered these words because he really didn't know what to say, he was so terrified. Peter desired to hold onto this moment by building something, or having something he could see or touch. Let us build three tents, something that will last. Peter wanted to construct something tangible to mark something transcendent, as if he could build a dwelling place to hold the revelation of Moses, Elijah, and the Messiah all in one place. Peter was doing the same thing that we all tend to do. "Let's have something to show for what happened here." We still do that. We put up markers on the highways to remember some historical person or event. We carry a small stone in our pocket. We have a particular seashell on our bookshelf. Peter wanted to hold on to what they had encountered.

I have mentioned this before, that the Christian Church ended up doing exactly what Peter had proposed. At the very top of Mt. Tabor, and large church has been constructed, now centuries old. As you enter the main church, you notice something interesting. On your left, you see a chapel dedicated to Moses, with a majestic tile mosaic depicting the great giver of the law. On the right, there is another chapel, the same size, and this one is dedicated to Elijah, with his picture also in a beautiful

mosaic. And as you keep walking, in the very center of the magnificent church, you see the place for Jesus, with a very large representation of him.

The church, like Peter, wanted to proclaim that this was holy ground, that something wondrous happened here. Wouldn't it be wonderful to stay up here on the mountain? Or if we can't stay, wouldn't it be fitting to remember it somehow, and capture this moment? That way we could come back later, and perhaps experience the same thing.

Perhaps you have had powerful moments or places on your spiritual journey. You can probably easily imagine the time and place very clearly. A place or time when you received some kind of epiphany, a small revelation of God being with you. Maybe it was in church, or a classroom, at home, or in the mountains. You realized in that moment that this was holy ground; God was here. And maybe you still have a tangible reminder of that place and time.

But the story from the gospel tells us that the transfiguration, like all our epiphanies, is not about building things, or trying to hold onto a single moment. The story tells us that as soon as Peter spoke, a cloud overshadows them, and a voice declares, "this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly, they look around, and find there is no one else with them anymore, only Jesus.

In the center of that beautiful church at the top of Mt. Tabor is the monument to Christ. There, your eyes move up naturally to the glorious image of Christ. Below are Peter's eloquent words, "It is good for us to be here." That is the meaning of the transfiguration. Here, in this place, now, in this very moment, is the revelation of God, the living Christ. Listen. That is enough. Don't build, don't plan ahead for how to memorialize the event, don't run to the souvenir shop to buy a postcard. Just know that here and now is God's revelation to you. Listen. Open your eyes and heart.

It is okay to want reminders. But what matters the most is not the polished rock on my desk, it was spending time and learning with Troy Bronner. It is not the exact pew you were sitting in when the Spirit gave you comfort, or peace, or guidance, it is about the connection with you and God. It is what those things point to. What matters in the story from the Bible is not the tent Peter wanted to build, or even the impressive building the Christian Church did build on top of the mountain. What

matters most in your spiritual story is not any *thing*, it is encountering Jesus, the living Christ. Reminders are good. Jesus is better.

The community of All Saints has constructed a dwelling place, our place of worship, our church. And that is good. We need these places of prayer like this. That is why we climb or drive to the foothill of this mountain every Sunday. To pray, and listen, to give ourselves to God, and to trust that God comes to us Christ Jesus. And we also know that Spirit can work anywhere. Anywhere. We can trust that the Spirit is with us when we come down from the mountain, when we walk out of the doors of this church and return to our homes and families and communities where we live and work.

After the glorious Transfiguration, we are told that the disciples simply walk back down with Jesus. They have had the brilliant revelation from God, and now they go about walking the rest of the journey. But they would not be alone. And neither are we. We have Jesus. Christ is our companion. That is our marker. That is our reminder: Jesus walking with us on the mountaintops, in the valleys, everywhere in our daily lives.

Let us praise God for this moment. May we praise God most of all for the gift of Jesus. It is good for us to be here. Amen.

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Trace Browning

Year B – Last Sunday after the Epiphany

2 Kings 2:1-12 • Psalm 50:1-6 • 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 • Mark 9:2-9

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