

Matthew 16:24-17:9
February 19, 2023
Ellen Crawford True

Holy Ground

Following last week's text, Jesus continues to heal the sick and teach the crowds and rankle the religious elite. He again feeds thousands from a few loaves and fewer fish. Once he arrives in Caesarea Philippi, he asks the gathered disciples who people say that he is. They tell him that some think he is Elijah or John the Baptist come again. And then Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the Living God. Jesus rejoices, asserting that such belief and believers like Peter form the very foundation of the church. In what is known as the first of three passion predictions, Jesus then tells them that the Son of Man, the Messiah, Jesus himself will soon suffer, be killed, and then raised after three days. And Peter protests, causing Jesus to call him a stumbling stone and satan. This one—who moments before was on the receiving end of Jesus' praise—is now the one who is rebuffed for not understanding who Jesus is at all. [Read Matthew 16:24-17:9]

Holy ground. When we think of holy ground moments, this time on that mountaintop ranks right up there with Moses and the burning bush and the women in the garden on the first Easter. Removed from the rest of the world, three disciples witness God's breaking in and for a moment everything becomes clear. It is extraordinary, and unlike anything they have witnessed before. Matthew's gospel—along with Mark's and Luke's—tries to find the words to describe what happens. Jesus' appearance is changed somehow. His face shines. *Transfigured* is the word they use. And yet, Jesus is still Jesus. This one who has fed thousands and called the ragtag group of disciples into ministry and calmed the storm is the same one speaking with Moses and Elijah, two figures from the Old Testament that point to the coming of the Messiah. This momentous occasion gives Peter an idea. He'll

build tents or shrines for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Maybe he is trying to dig in and camp out, to stake out a more permanent spot on this holy terrain and stay here surrounded by this other-worldly cloud, or maybe he simply wants to find a way to mark the place where something unheard of occurred, the moment when God made all of it crystal clear. Can we blame him?

Then comes one of my favorite moments: while Peter is babbling on about shrines, God interrupts him “while he [is] still talking.” I get Peter. Quite often I AM Peter. Some people get nervous or excited and get quiet. I get excited or nervous and I talk. God probably wants to interrupt me, too. Here God interrupts Peter and tells him and the other two disciples that this Jesus is God’s Son, the beloved, just as God declared at Jesus’ baptism. At the baptism in Matthew’s telling, it is unclear whether anyone other than Jesus hears God’s voice. Here on the mountain the disciples hear God speak, too. They fall on their faces in fear, until Jesus lays his hand on them and tells them to stand up, or “be raised,” as the Greek reads. And they see Jesus standing with them; the one who spoke with Moses and Elijah, the one whom God declared to be the beloved Son, this Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is standing right there with them still. Jesus will go on to command these three to tell no one what they saw for a while. I’m not sure they could find the words if they tried. Either way, they head back down the mountain with minds and hearts full of this wondrous thing they have just witnessed. They just can’t tell anyone about it. Scholars give all sorts of reasons for this, but I wonder if Jesus might simply be concerned that talk of the mountaintop might get in the way of their seeing and speaking to the holy ground moments that await them in the valley. I wonder if Jesus worries that the mountaintop moment could overshadow the power of all that lies ahead. I wonder if he worries how their testimony about the mountaintop could curtail the good holy work Jesus is bound and determined to do in the valley below.

Our tradition has on occasion shied away from testimonies. Testifying can make us uncomfortable; it can also get competitive. I for one have not had a mountaintop moment, per se. I have had holy ground moments in the midst of the valley, however. I'm guessing you have, too. And those testimonies are essential to our being the church. Testimony is not about how special or perfect we are. Testimony declares how amazing God is. Without the testimony of those who came before us, without their courage to see and name a God who dares to get involved in the ordinariness of human life, we would not have scripture, nor would we have the precious inheritance of a living faith. And living faith is more than words on a page. A living faith asks questions and wonders why. A living faith calls us to have the courage to risk relationships with those who seem alien or even hostile. A living faith prods us to have the brashness to proclaim that not everything can be pinned down and explained. A living faith urges us to trust that God is as close as our breath and more mysterious than the stardust flung here from distant galaxies. And a living faith changes how we see the world around us, changes how we relate to others; simply put, faith changes us. And when we find words to share our faith, to witness to what we have seen and known on the mountaintop *and* in the valley, perhaps by the grace of God and the work of the Spirit, others are changed, too. I know I am. In those moments at bedsides and in backyards, in bible study and in lunch bunch, in conversations on the sidewalk downtown or in the grocery store, I am reminded that we are always standing on holy ground. It is easy to forget; life speeds by, busyness consumes us, and heartbreak stops us in our tracks. There are bills to be paid; errands to be run; families to be fed; homework to be finished; and jobs to do. So if faith is going to change us, if our faith is going to change the world, we need reminders that God shows up in ways that do not make sense and at times when nothing makes sense, not only in the rarefied air of the mountaintop but also here in the valley.

The Books & Brews group just finished a book entitled *Project Hail Mary*. It is the story of Dr. Ryland Grace, an academic turned middle school science teacher who winds up being the lone passenger on a spaceship sent to figure out how to stop the literal end of the world due to a rogue organism that is devouring the sun's energy. His journey is intended to be a one-way trip. The plan is for him to send information and saving help back to Earth using small spaceships once he has made his discovery, giving his life for the lives of an entire planet. Along the way, Dr. Grace befriends an alien he names Rocky. They are stranger than strangers. They are alien to one another, yet Rocky's planet is in dire straits as well, so rather than assuming that the other is a threat to be battled or ignored, they risk a relationship to work together to see if they can find a solution. Together these very different creatures learn to understand one another, laugh with one another, support one another, and cherish one another as the dearest of friends. They have an overwhelmingly huge task before them, and yet there is beauty and humor and yes, grace in the moments in between. Some of the most poignant moments come when Rocky insists that he watch Grace sleep. It is standard practice for Rocky's people. Sleep is a dangerous thing for Rocky's kind, so he insists that he stand by as Grace sleeps. And Grace comes to appreciate the profound tenderness of Rocky's vigils. The two cannot live in a shared space because they require different air to breathe and different temperatures to survive, so Rocky cleverly creates tunnels and a protective bubble enabling the two to work alongside one another toward a shared goal of saving their peoples. Rocky and his people live in complete darkness using sonar instead of sight. Grace depends on his vision and light to determine where they are and what needs to be done next. Grace is the scientist. Rocky is the engineer. They are different in countless ways, and yet they find common ground and even holy ground in this risky relationship in the midst of

deepest space as they pledge themselves and their lives to saving their own people along with an alien one.

Jesus knows he and Peter, James, and John cannot stay on that mountain. He knows that a humanity in need of saving remains in the valley below. He will give his life for them, for us, strange, ornery, and stubborn as we are. Peter does not like the notion of his beloved teacher dying or suffering in any way. Nor do we if we're honest. And the powers that be will bent on stopping this one who disrupts everything with love, justice, kindness, and mercy. I understand why Peter might prefer to keep Jesus on that mountain, away from the risks and threats that loom in the valley below. And yet Jesus is determined to risk relationship with those who would welcome him *and* with those who are threatened by him and would do him harm. He will not be deterred from sharing his life, his light with them, or from giving his life for them all. There are people who need saving, and holy work that needs doing. Jesus heads down the mountain and toward Jerusalem to save every last one of us and to build a church with and on the likes of us.

Toward the end of the book (spoiler alert), Rocky comes to Grace with tremendous news. The earth's sun has returned to full brightness, the light has not gone out and has in fact been transformed back into the life-giving, planet-sustaining miracle that life on earth relies upon. Rocky knows this because he and his people have been hoping, waiting, and looking (in their own way) for the sun's brightness to break through the deep darkness of space from light years away. This news is unbelievably huge—mountaintop-worthy even, and yet this news is matched by the image of Dr. Grace's new life among Rocky's people, a life filled with kindness, community, good work to do, hospitality, joy, and love of the holiest kind. There is no mention of God or faith in the book, and yet, I see holy ground everywhere Grace finds himself.

Then again, I am always on the lookout for grace and goodness and holiness and hope, not simply because of what I do, but also because of who I depend on God to be. Yes, I lean heavily on God's mystery, on God's being God and my *not* being God, *and* I need to know that God shows up and is faithfully at work not only in the big show on the mountaintop, but also here in the foothills and in the valley. The salvation of all creation seems light years away most days, and yet if I listen closely, I can hear God's voice celebrating the beloved Son and calling me to listen to him above the noise that surrounds me, surrounds us in the valley. When I see a spark of beauty or hear a whisper of hope or witness an act of self-giving sacrifice or a new risky relationship being born, can I be certain that the God of the Universe has broken in? Maybe not, yet when we are poised to listen for the ways of God, to look for the holy work of redemption, promise, hope, mercy, justice, love, and life, I am convinced that we will see that we, too, are standing together on holy ground. I am convinced that by the grace of God, we will catch a glimpse of God in our midst, not only on mountaintops but here in the midst of the lowest and lowliest of valleys. For this is the place where God in Christ meets us. This is the place where Immanuel, God-with-us risks a relationship with us. This is the place where God watches us as we sleep, the place where God stands by us in our most frightening moments, the place where God touches our shoulders and bids us to be raised, the place where God enables us to stand again and take the next right step. And this is the place where Christ calls us to be his people and to be his church. For *this* is the place where God in Christ has promised to be with us always. Holy ground, indeed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.