

“Demon Free”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Transfiguration Sunday  
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 26, 2017

**Luke 9:28-45**

*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

*On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.*

*And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.*

You know how those little Valentine’s candy hearts have words written on them? And some chocolates have things to read once you open the aluminum wrapper? (Check out the ones on Laurie’s desk in the office right now—I may or may not be speaking from experience.) This trend has made the switch from sweet to wet, and now my tea bags have little sayings on the labels too. They try to have positive, heartfelt and encouraging messages, the sort of pithy philosophy that makes you say, “Awwww!” and then promptly forget them.

I don’t usually pay much attention to these tea bag proverbs, but the other day this one caught my eye: “The purpose of life is to enjoy every moment.” Enjoy every moment—really? *That’s* the purpose of life? Maybe if you don’t have any other purpose this will do for a start, but surely there’s more to life than enjoying *every* moment. How is that even possible, anyway, since most moments are beyond human control? Are you supposed to enjoy the moment a loved one passes away, an addict suffers a relapse, a person loses their home, the baby is lost, or the lead news is calamity yet again? We can’t command our every moment to be enjoyable without cutting ourselves off from the world with self-indulgent privilege, and to do so would only serve the idol of hedonism. On the contrary, it’s the terrible moments which help us truly value and appreciate the more enjoyable ones. But forgive me—I’ve already spent more time thinking about this little saying than the time which went into its composition.

I bring this up because it highlights a difference between Jesus and his disciples in today’s text. Peter operates with a philosophy of enjoying every moment. Even though he’s bewildered by all that’s going on at the top of the mountain, Peter suggests that this is a good place to stay for a while—maybe longer. He

knows that “it is good for us to be here”, so “let us build three dwellings.” Transfiguration is such a moment of clarity that Peter wants to remain here forever. A voice comes to the disciples from out of the clouds as an unmistakable divine affidavit: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” At this climactic moment, the whole truth, message and identity of Christ could not have been clearer. I can understand why the disciples wanted to stay up there forever!

But what does Jesus do instead? “On the next day”—Imagine that it’s Monday. The Transfiguration was Sunday, next comes Monday. And on Monday they’ve come down from the mountain. A great crowd meets Jesus, like a tidal wave of people crashing into the once-peaceful shoreline. A man cries out—save my son, my only child! He’s got a demon, and only you can deliver him! Jesus is pulled *immediately* back into the work week. Is it the Monday blues that cause him to snap at them, to call them a “faithless and perverse generation”? But he immediately follows it up with the merciful command: “Bring your son here.” Jesus heals the boy, restoring the only child back to his father. “And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

This healing of another beloved son is marvelous enough, but Jesus has something else of importance in mind. He calls the disciples to pay attention like they’ve never paid attention before. “Let these words sink into your ears”—picture that for a moment. Then the message: “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” This is already the second time that Jesus tells his disciples it won’t always be glory on the mountaintops and miraculous healings. The purpose of the divine life is *not* to enjoy every moment, but to follow the will of God whether on the mountain or in the valley. In this there is greater satisfaction than even moment-to-moment pleasures. God is in the grey and pain as well as in the glory.

This flies in the face of popular opinion, I know. The public assumption of life is that one should always be trying to move from glory to glory. There’s a shadow side to this idea though. If “the purpose of life is to enjoy every moment”, those who are *not* enjoying must have missed their purpose somewhere. This becomes subtle pressure to put on a happy face and makes us unwilling or unable to share the hardships of life. It leads people to apologize for their vulnerability and tears, or feel that God loves them less if they’re in pain. That’s why our sharing of joys *and* concerns, celebrations *and* sorrows, is a counter cultural act. We trust that God cares about our pains, and this community cares about them too.

The writer Debi Thomas connects well the dots between mountaintop and valley, together every time a community gathers. [She writes](#),

*The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit — while one pew over I cry my eyes out because the ache of [God's] absence feels unbearable.*

*The same applies if I widen the lens. Do we not — in the privileged West — occupy so many mountains, while our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence, and abuse? Do we not at the same time experience valleys peculiar to modern 21st century life — isolation, anxiety, depression, frenzy — while many who have less by way of material comfort enjoy the mountaintops of more nourishing cultural traditions and communities? ...[H]ere's the great challenge to the Christian life — the great challenge to the Church, Christ's body: can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other — denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love 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 truly alone?"*

Perhaps that’s why, if you look closely, you’ll notice reminders of suffering amid the hoopla of Mardi Gras festivities. Sad masks and little skulls are stylized reminders that this celebration is because there is a time of sorrow just around the corner. Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday”, traditionally the last chance to enjoy rich food before the fast of Lent begins. Even if we don’t follow those customs with

exactitude now, it's a reminder that every life has moments of trial that are impossible to enjoy. To think otherwise is to have a short-sighted view of human existence.

Transfiguration Sunday, then, is the Mardi Gras of the church year, a time when the disciples and Jesus are gathered in festive, glittery celebration—glory and triumph on the mountaintop. And we need such joyful clarity at times. But do not make the mistake of this tea bag wrapper, thinking that enjoying such moments perpetually is the whole purpose of life. Rather, the purpose of life is to be so compelled by what we are called to do that we can leave the cozy and perfect mountaintop, returning down the mountain to the work of discipleship in the valleys. This is the path of deeper calling, and it's the good news of Jesus Christ, because if we're in the grey Christ will come to remind us that glory awaits as well. So this day, let us be a community of joyful Fat Tuesday and also of Ash Wednesday, freed of the cheap-grace demon that suggests there's no challenge in life, called by Christ to heal those in suffering, enlisted in the costs and joys of discipleship.

Let us pray: *Dazzling God, reveal yourself to us today, showing what you desire of us on the mountaintop and in the valley. Amen.*