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*What Happens on the Mountain . . .*  
A sermon for Transfiguration Sunday  
Luke 9:28-36  
March 3, 2019

It's REVIEW time. Our church's mission statement is what? That's right. "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." This winter, we have been reflecting on what it means to live with purpose. For us, living with purpose means following Christ: doing the things Jesus did and following his teachings. To that end, we've been reading the Gospel readings in the lectionary each week, and asking: what did Jesus do?

We're beginning to compile a pretty good list of things that Jesus did. Early in his ministry, in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus announced his own mission statement: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then Jesus went out and started doing that. He told the poor that they were blessed, that they owned the kingdom of heaven. He released people from the captivity of grudges and bitterness by preaching forgiveness, and love for enemies. He healed people, and helped them see.

Jesus has been doing all the things he said he would do, and he's doing them with a team of disciples, a group of people who are following along and watching and learning.

That's us today—the church is a team of disciples that follows Jesus. We watch and learn as we stay close to Christ, and spend time with him and one another. Then we put what we learn into action. So for example, last week I gave you and myself the assignment of identifying someone in your life that might be a kind of enemy—somebody you don't like, or somebody who might not like you, somebody you avoid if at all possible. We were to hold this person in prayer all week, praying for them every morning and every night, and asking God's blessing on

them. By the way, how did that go? Did you stop after one week, or did you keep going for two weeks, since we didn't have church this week?

Today's story is different, because Jesus doesn't really DO a whole lot. He isn't healing, or teaching, or traveling around, or feeding a bunch of people. We call this story "The Transfiguration," because for a moment, Jesus' three most trusted disciples, his innermost circle, get a glimpse of their teacher and friend shining in glory, whatever that looks like. They see two spiritual giants from Israel's history actually TALKING to Jesus. Peter is so moved he wants to capture and preserve this experience by embarking on a building project. Kind of like us, when we're traveling and we see something really beautiful—we want to take pictures, and buy souvenirs, so we'll always remember how we felt when we saw it.

Well, then there's a cloud, and a voice from heaven, and just a whole bunch of stuff that's way outside normal, everyday life. If Peter, James, and John had had any doubt at all about who Jesus was, this moment of divine revelation would surely set things straight. What wouldn't we give, today, to experience a moment like that. Wouldn't that just give you so much encouragement, and joy, and strength in your faith? To hear even just a word or two of that voice from heaven, to see Christ's face shining in front of you for just a few seconds?

There are many angles we could explore in this story, but in keeping with our current focus on living with purpose, we will zoom in today on the one thing Jesus does in this story: he takes his closest friends, and goes up the mountain to PRAY.

Last Saturday, I had a hard time concentrating on writing this sermon, even though writing sermons is one of my favorite things to do, because I kept wondering about the weather, and would the forecast change, and would I need to cancel worship, and if so, when should I do it? So I'd check the weather on my phone, and from there it was just too easy to check Facebook

and email and the news and a bunch of other things that probably weren't nearly as urgent as they seemed. I thought about the time that Jesus lived in. No television, no radio, no newspapers, no cell phones, no social media, no movies, no cars honking their horns, no March Madness or Super Bowls, none of the distractions that we have today. No electricity. They didn't even have books—I mean, they had scrolls, but you couldn't just pull a scroll off your shelf and curl up on your sofa with a good scroll to pass the time.

With none of our modern-day distractions to tempt him, Jesus felt the need to go up a mountain for the sole purpose of prayer. You'd think somebody like Jesus could pray anytime, anywhere, no matter what was going on, with total concentration, but apparently even Jesus needed, to make time and space to pray.

I wonder if Jesus ever got any grief for doing that. I can just picture some of the more task-oriented disciples getting frustrated: Come on Jesus, wrap it up! Day's a wastin'! There are people to heal, and demons to cast out! Or maybe they had learned early on that it was no use to try to rush Jesus when he was praying. He was going to pray as long as he wanted to pray, and that was that. And maybe daily prayer became the precious time of day for all of them.

When we make our to-do-lists . . . where does "uninterrupted prayer time" come on your list? When is the last time you got away for the sole purpose of prayer? If Jesus needed to do it, how much more do we?

The point of this sermon isn't to make anybody feel bad for not praying more, but simply to highlight how powerful prayer can be. One thing that both our Old Testament and New Testament readings have in common is the role of PRAYER in transforming both Moses and Jesus. Moses doesn't make his own face shine by praying a lot. But in the friendship that Moses developed with God through sustained prayer, it would seem that God's glory began to rub off

on Moses . . . and note that it was WHILE Jesus was praying, WHILE he was in that moment of connection with his father in heaven, that his face changed, and his clothes became so dazzling white.

Some people have observed that many couples, not all, who have been married to each other for many years start to look like each other. Have you noticed this? I think some of it has to do with the fact that they often have similar lifestyles, so they get similar amounts of activity and sunshine. But also there's the possibility that they start mirroring each other's facial expressions a little bit over time. So their lines begin to fall in the same sorts of places . . . they just kind of rub off on each other over the years. And I think the more we cultivate our own relationship with God through prayer, the more God begins to rub off on us. And I don't know about you, but I sure could use a whole lot more of that.

There's that verse in the New Testament letter of James, which we spent a lot of time on last fall as you may remember—"Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you," James 4:8. Prayer is one of the key ways we do that. By prayer, I mean not only talking to God, but listening for God, and being still and silent in God's presence. Lollygagging with God.

There's nothing wrong with squeezing prayer in, as we go about a busy day filled with activities—in fact, squeezing in some prayer is fantastic—but the kind of prayer that lets God rub off on us takes time, just like good relationships take time. It takes patience, and the willingness to be bored, and to feel things we've been stuffing deep inside because we didn't want to feel them, and to keep coming back to our prayer when we get distracted. Which always happens, and there's no need to feel bad about it. Just keep coming back.

You know, Jesus makes no apologies for making prayer a priority. No apologies for taking all the time he needs, to luxuriate in time alone with God and close friends. No apologies for being unreachable and unavailable. To be close to God, even Jesus had to put in the time.

Now. Those of you who have done any hiking or climbing know that it is pretty great at the top of the mountain. You see things from an angle that you just can't see any other way. It's quiet, it's peaceful, it's beautiful. Heaven feels a little closer.

But eventually, you have to come back down. Just like Moses before him, Jesus came down and waded right back into the messiness, hurts, and gaping needs of humankind. That's his pattern. Go off and pray, get centered and connected with God, then come back and be with the people. Prayer, then action. Then prayer again. Then action. NOT—little dribbles and drops of prayer, squeezed between actions. Big, glorious, chunks of prayer. Meals, not snacks.

To live out our mission statement, to let God's glory shine through us as brightly as I believe it can, this church needs followers of Christ who will make prayer a priority.

I want to challenge you to take your own prayer life to the next level, whatever that looks like. If you don't yet pray on a daily basis, try praying once a day for five to ten minutes. If you already do that, give yourself a 30-minute chunk this week. If you already do that, try an hour, just one day this week. Just you and God. You can bring your Bible if you want. You can bring the prayer list if you want. You can sing, if you want. You can bring a journal and pen if you want. We have some wonderful resources for prayer at this church, including this lovely Lenten devotional guide, which you can pick up in the church office. Whatever you choose, pray. Just pray. Close your eyes and picture Jesus on that mountain, and picture yourself talking to him. What would you say? What would he say to you? That's prayer. Let US pray . . .