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## Called Down

Matthew 17:1-9

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 26, 2017,  
by the Rev. Katie Owen Aumann

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*Come Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, with all thy quickening power. Come shed abroad a Savior's love that it may kindle ours. For if you are with us, then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters. Amen*

Last Friday night, a group of Presbyterian Campus Ministry students and Duke Chapel Scholars spent the night in this gothic cathedral. Instead of going out to parties on campus, this group of students grabbed sleeping bags and showed up to be locked in the Chapel for a night of reflection, service, and worship. My students will tell you that I think God called me to college ministry and not youth ministry in part because I *hate* lock-ins, so it is a testament to my love of them that I left my husband and 4-month-old at home to stay up into the wee hours of the night locked in a church. I'm sure that some of the students came for the fellowship and Christian community. Others came because it was something to do on a Friday night. Others came for the sheer intrigue. But I'm sure that a few came because the lock-in promised a sunrise climb of the Chapel Tower.

At 6:15am, having slept less than 4 hours, I roused the sleeping bodies from all over the chapel basement. Tying their shoes and rubbing their eyes and praying to God for coffee, we began the climb up the 239 stairs to stand high above the campus where the air was crisp, the light was clear, and the beams of the sun were just peaking over the horizon. From high atop Duke Chapel, in the stillness of the crisp morning, we could see all the way to enemy territory in Chapel Hill. Most of us stood in silence taking in the new day, some out of reverence, some out of sheer exhaustion. Having sat in the darkness of the Chapel just a few hours earlier for midnight vespers longing for God's presence and light, our instincts told us that going up, climbing toward the heavens that morning would bring us closer to God.

And surely we are not alone. From an early age, most of us are taught that God lives in the heavens, somewhere up high in the clouds. Perhaps this is parents' way of answering questions they cannot fully explain. When a small child asks, "where does God live?" "In heaven" appears to be an easy answer, or at least one that children, whose comfort with mystery exceeds most adults, will accept. Far away and high above, our understanding of God is enveloped in transcendent mystery. The God who created the heavens and earth has taken up residence in the sky above. Gazing upward, the heavens are so distant and expansive that we cannot help but be drawn into the mystery beyond our grasp.

And yet, we long to know. We long to be near. We long to encounter God in a more tangible way. And so our instincts tell us that climbing toward the heavens will draw us nearer to the presence of the Holy. Whether a Chapel tower or a mountaintop, we trek upward hoping that God might peel back the mystery from high atop the clouds and enable us to see and know and trust that the one who made heaven and earth would dare to care about us.

We are not alone in our longing to draw heaven and earth closer together and we are not the first to climb to the highest heights to meet God. The mountaintop is the place throughout God's sacred story that those seeking God's presence go to encounter the Holy.

Moses climbed the mountain and wrapped in a cloud that looked like fire, he waited 40 days and 40 nights. And he received God's commandments.  
On the mountain, God's law was given. (Exodus 24)

The prophet Elijah, having shown God's power in the face of other gods, fled out of fear and climbed Mount Horeb. Instructed to wait patiently 40 days and 40 nights, God passed before him and spoke in a still small voice on the mountaintop.  
On the mountain, the future for God's chosen people was promised. (1 Kngs 19)

Even Jesus heard his Father's claim of belovedness as he came up out of the baptismal waters and was thrust into the wilderness and tempted by the devil for 40 days and 40 nights. And high atop of the mountain, being offered all the kingdoms he could see, Jesus promised to worship God alone.  
On the mountain, Jesus' fidelity to God was confirmed. (Matt 4)

Being drawn up into God's presence on the mountain, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus return with an encounter that is inexplicable, mysterious, and yet real.

And so our text this morning begins at the foot of the mountain with Jesus' invitation to go on a hike. An innocent enough hike with some pretty decent friends...the same friends who had responded to his invitation to be disciples, the same friends who had followed him around the countryside preaching and teaching, the same friends who had just been told that to follow Jesus is to take up their cross. Jesus goes up the mountain with THESE friends. But as Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain in this morning's text, our instincts tell us that this trek up the mountain is no ordinary hike. Because going up the mountain to meet God changes us.

Set apart in the thin mountain air, the light of God rested upon Jesus so that he was dazzling white and those whom God has met on the mountaintop before appear with him. But this trip up the mountain is different than Moses or Elijah. God's presence isn't just in a voice or a cloud. God's presence is in the very person of Jesus who is transfigured before them. God reveals himself in a way that can't be explained but in a way that the disciples could not remain the same. **In this mountaintop moment, the transcendence and imminence of God meet in the person of Jesus the Christ.**

And Peter, sweet, sweet Peter, is the overachieving Duke student of the disciples. He knows this is a pinnacle moment and wants to stay in it as long as he can. He springs into action, "Lord, let me build you a house! In fact, I'll build three!" Peter missed all the lectures on ethics of engagement, on listening and learning from your surroundings before jumping to assume what the needs are. Rather

than dwell in the mysterious moment, he wants to help, to act, to resolve the issue at hand. God is here. Let's build him a house, put God in a box, so God can be contained and we can remain safe together on this mountain forever. If Peter had his choice, he'd prefer to stay right here—near to God, but in a controlled, measurable environment that he can eventually study, unpack, and turn into a thesis. As Jesus dazzles before him, Peter realizes he's in the presence of God and would clearly prefer to stay than to go back down to the crowds of people in need and the journey to Jerusalem fraught with danger and death. If Peter had his way, he'd stay up on the mountain, on vacation with God, forever.

It is no secret that the world we live in today is full of difficulty. Walking around on the earth right now seems to bring with it a measure of darkness, anxiety, and fear. Globally, we saw another week of ISIS attacks in Syria and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Locally, the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham honored and remembered the 44 lives taken by violence in 2016 in our own community.<sup>2</sup> Whether at home or abroad, people on both sides of the aisle bear a level of anxiety about the world today. Many of us, like Peter, would prefer to escape up the mountain to stay in the presence of God on heavenly vacation than deal with the troubles on the ground.

So, we like Peter think we would prefer to make residence on the mountain with God. But while Peter so often gets the intellectual questions correct, he's rarely prepared for the mystery. Just when Peter thinks it's safe and desirable to stay—God speaks out of the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

As with Moses and Elijah before, God's voice once again echoes from the mountaintop. "This is my Son, the Beloved." But God doesn't stop with the claim that Jesus is His Beloved Son, as he does at Jesus' baptism. This time, *God's voice* commands the disciples to listen to *Jesus' voice*. The transcendent, far off God whom we meet in the thin mountain air gifts his heavenly voice to his Son, the one whom we call Emmanuel, God with us. Listen to him.

High atop the mountain, the mysterious grandeur of *God's voice* causes these disciples to quake in fear. But then...then their friend, the one whom they have journeyed with, whom they know well and trust, *Jesus' voice* dispels their fear. And with a simple touch and few words, the fear and the inexplicable transfiguring light on Jesus vanishes and they hear the familiar voice of their rabbi and friend with fresh ears. The scandal of the Gospel, the surprise of the transfiguration, is that the transcendent, otherness of God becomes fleshly present before us in Jesus the Christ.

The real mystery of the transfiguration is not that Jesus becomes dazzling white or that Moses and Elijah appear or even that God speaks out of the cloud. The real mystery of the transfiguration is that the transcendent God who appears in the heavens and whom we meet on the mountaintop walks down the mountain in the incarnate person of Jesus to touch us, to be with us, to walk among

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/middleeast/syria-security-offices-attacks.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/middleeast/syria-security-offices-attacks.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nonviolentdurham.org/events/>

us, to travel the road to the cross for us. The real mystery is that looking for God's presence no longer requires us to climb to the highest heights but to pay attention to the simple touch and to listen to Jesus' voice, "Get up. Do not be afraid."

And Jesus' message is simple and clear: We cannot stay here, distant from the troubles of the world. Come with me. Come back down the mountain. Do not be afraid. And called down from on high, Jesus and Peter, James, and John, and you and I dare to walk this earth unafraid. That doesn't mean that the road ahead will be easy. From this point forth, Jesus is aware he is no longer foreshadowing his death but walking the road to the cross. But with fear dispelled by Jesus' touch and with fresh ears to hear Jesus' call, we as disciples are better able to take up our crosses and follow, strengthened by the presence of God in our very midst.

Propelled down the mountain, we walk the road ahead with new confidence, listening for Jesus' voice in messages of peace that shutter fear. To listen for God's voice no longer requires ascent to the clouds but simply to listen for Christ's promises of hope among us. And Christ's voice can be heard in the reassuring words of a friend who sits with you on your darkest night. Christ's voice can be heard in the cries of marchers calling out for justice. Christ's voice can be heard at vigils by community members who cry out against violence, "Enough!" Christ's voice can be heard at the bedside of a dying loved one saying, "it's ok to let go." Christ's voice can be heard in delivery rooms fresh with new life as women are charged to push through the pain. And Christ's voice can be heard not on the top of the tower but in the basement of this chapel when students gather for worship on a Sunday night, exchange prayer concerns, and offer one another signs of peace.

This Wednesday, we will mark the beginning of the Lenten journey toward the cross with ashes. Bearing the sign of the cross on our foreheads, we wear Christ's claim on our lives—from birth to death, dust to dust—out into the seemingly perilous world. It is no mistake that Jesus' transfiguration immediately precedes our Lenten journey. Called down the mountain to take up our cross, we need the reminder that God doesn't live far off in the clouds but dares to walk this earth with us in full humanity with full mortality. Called down the mountain with fear dispelled, we are able to hear Jesus' words of hope and peace. It does not mean that the road will not be filled with danger. Bearing the cross costs Jesus his life. But we walk this journey with God *in the flesh* trusting that fear and death do not get the final word.

Having seen the light of the new dawn, the students and I climbed back down the chapel tower aware that the mountaintop or the tower's peak is a place we can go, but not a place we can stay. Nor do we need to. For Jesus, who was transfigured on the mountain made a transcendent God accessible through a human touch and a familiar voice. Can you hear it?