
THE FULLNESS OF FOLLOWING JESUS

LUKE 9:28-43A

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2022,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

Jesus is up to it again, literally. He went up on the mountain to pray with Peter, James, and John. Praying on a mountain, away from the hustle and bustle of life and ministry, wasn't unusual for Jesus. Sometimes, he needed to go up, to get above a situation, above the noise, to see things in a different way and to listen to his Father. Jesus needed times of respite, like us, times "to center down, to sit quietly and see [him]self pass by" (Howard Thurman). He needed moments of quiet reflection; he wasn't just divine but human, so he needed this time away from the fray.

And it's clear that the mountaintop experience in the gospel of Luke is one of contemplation. All of the signs are there. Not only did they go up to pray, but while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah show up for the coffee hour fellowship, representing the law and the prophets. And they, along with Jesus, appear in glory (*doxa*), where we get the word 'doxology.' And then Peter gets the bright idea like a liturgical renewal consultant and desires to make tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. And then a cloud comes, signifying God's presence, and they hear a voice, they are terrified and in awe, and in the end, they are silent about their experience. So we have prayer, visions, doxology, tabernacles, and silence—make no mistake, this is a scene of contemplation. I can almost hear the angelic chorus, the harps, the violins, the Chapel carillon, the rustling of the wings of the cherubim and seraphim. Cue the music for the hymn, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence..."

It's so relaxing to get away from the regular rigmarole of our daily routines, isn't it? To take, what some call, a 'forest bath' and walk in the woods to breathe, to be mindful, to let go of our concerns, and cast our cares to the wind and the trees. Or, to get to the Carolina beach to hear the ocean waves and smell that salty water and slow down and inhabit the sacrament of pause as a counterpoint to the "deadly magic" of activity (Thurman).

Without a doubt, there is a place for contemplation in the spiritual life when we follow Jesus. Jesus is there on a holy mountain. But he doesn't stay there and dare I say, he doesn't want to remain there. Peter, on the other hand, does. And maybe we do too—surrounded by the beauty and glow of stained-glass windows and the delicious sounds of pipe organs, and the expanse of the rise of neogothic ceilings calling us to the heavens. Who wouldn't want to stay where the glory is, where doxology seems to be flourishing, where prayers are rising as incense all throughout the week? There is a way in which we might never want to leave the safe cuddle of contemplation.

But Jesus doesn't stay on the mountain in contemplative prayer and praise. He doesn't bask in the silence or doxology of contemplation for too long. His head doesn't stay in the clouds. He comes down the mountain, which shouldn't be surprising because most of what we hear about Jesus in the scriptures is about his action, what he does. Getting away to pray is a part of his life, but most of his life, at least what we learn about, is his active life in ministry.

Contemplation is good and faithful but so is action. When Jesus comes down the mountain of solitude, immediately a crowd meets him. Jesus could almost preach a sermon, "I've been to the mountaintop, but I'm also acquainted with the valley!" He leaves the solace of silence for the noise and shrieks of the crowd in Ukraine. The serenity of the mountain is replaced with the struggles of the global marketplace. God is in the contemplation but what Jesus reveals is that God is also present in the action. God is found in the hush of silence, but God is also found in the howling noise, in the shout, in the volume. God doesn't only do ballroom dancing. God does breakdancing too!

Jesus shows us that we can meet God on a secluded mountain or in a monastery, but you can also meet God down the mountain in the chaotic mess of daily life among the crowd's turmoil, like a desperate father's cry for his tormented and only son or the desperate cry of Ukrainian citizens whose land has been invaded by a power-hungry neighbor.

You may have visions of God in contemplation on a mountain retreat but to what end? In this gospel story, encounter with the presence of God on the mountain is what leads to the encounter with the pain and misery of a wounded world. If you authentically meet God in prayer, you should also be meeting people in their pain. How can this not be so when on both sides of this transfiguration story and within it, we hear about the exodus or departure of Jesus that would be accomplished at Jerusalem where he will cross his own red sea on a physical cross for the life and freedom of the world?

Jesus, himself, moved toward his own suffering and death, even as he predicts it. And on his way there, down the mountain, he encounters and engages others who are suffering like the son of that desperate man who shouts out for help. The lure of the cuddles of contemplation cannot stop Jesus from redeeming, healing action. He leaves the silence of the mountain to encounter a son who is silent in his own suffering because he never says a word. All we know is what happens *to* this son because he's passive; he's acted upon. We don't know his age or whether his favorite chicken sandwich is from Chic-fil-A or Popeyes or what Wii video games he likes to play or his dreams for the future. All we know is that a spirit seizes him, mauls him, makes him shriek, convulse, foam, and dashes him to the ground. There's so much noise and chaos on the ground of human life all over the world, but Jesus actively engages all of this, all of us, ultimately healing the boy, giving him back to his father, and restoring their relationship.

None of this would have happened if Jesus stayed up on the mountain in contemplation to shield himself from the hurt of the world. Instead, he reveals action as faithful practice too, one that is not afraid to engage the convulsing chaos of crowds or nations in a holy struggle for healing. The presence of God is not only on mountaintops but in the lowest valleys and the low times of life, including times of war. In this story, we see the greatness of God through the healing of the boy amid a crowd. Not in the calm, but in the convulsing chaos of everyday. Jesus is there and comes down to where we live, you live, down to our human level and situation, with all of our vast needs—whether it be related to our families or our health or our countries or anything else.

Jesus comes down to bring healing and wholeness to us through his action. Sometimes, you don't need to get away to a mountain to pray and do more spiritual exercises to connect to God. Sometimes, you just need to engage people who are in pain because that's where you'll find Jesus, too.

Tony Campolo, who preached at Duke Chapel many years ago, was once a guest speaker at a mission rally and he was asked to lead in prayer for a missionary doctor that this particular group supported. The goal of the prayer was that God might provide the \$5,000 urgently needed for the medical center the doctor ran.

Campolo refused to only pray because he knew that his audience was made up of people who were materially prosperous. So he declared he would pray only after everyone in the room gave to the project the money, they had on them that day. The audience members were stunned, as you can imagine, but when Campolo started emptying his own pockets they knew he was serious. After some hesitation everyone started following suit. The prayer request soon became a prayer of thanksgiving, because by the end of the giving they had collected \$8,000, much more than what was needed in the first place.

Contemplation, prayer, *and* action. Jesus modelled both. And as his followers, there's a call for us to do what he did. A fuller life, a more comprehensive view, of discipleship is offered today. The good news is that Jesus is in both contemplation *and* action. He's present wherever you are in the life of faith or in whatever direction you lean—in the contemplative or the active life. Jesus is there, in the fervent prayers and faithful protests.

This is the fullness of following Jesus, contemplation and action. It is a way of being whole such that I “live the outer life in the inward sanctuary” (Thurman) and I express the inward sanctuary through the outer life. Therefore, I don't seek to contemplate *or* act. I seek to be whole and have my bifurcated life—one that normally separates contemplation and action—healed, so that I might have one full life in Christ in the cloud of calm holy mountains and in the convulsing spasms of human chaos.

Sing the hymn, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ in the presence of God but don't leave it at that; become a hymn for God by being an agent of healing in the world.

This is a full life in Christ, a whole diet of faithful witness and practice before God. So on this Transfiguration Sunday, enter the silence and embrace the noise.