
"You want me to go where?"

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Luke 9:28-43a

It had been a number of months since I had been able to get away for a retreat. I arrived on hot, sticky, uncomfortable summer afternoon. I was grateful for some time to rest, pray, and get reconnected with God. I had made the requisite stops along the way to purchase provisions. The necessary stockpile of sparkling water, chocolate, and chex mix that I would need for a week of spiritual retreat and reflection.

I unloaded the car, first lugging a bag of books containing enough volumes for at least two months reading. I like to be prepared and preserve my options. My suitcase contained enough clothes for every possible expression of weather and mood affectation. I settled into my room and soon headed over to see Fay, my guide for the week, to update her on my life, receive her guidance, and get my prayer assignment for the day.

After several months absence there was a lot to catch her up on. It had not been a particularly easy few months. It had been fraught with over-busyness, turmoil, and a number of disappointments. A cascade of words tumbled anxiously out of my mouth, interrupted only briefly by my need to breathe. About an hour later, much to her relief I am sure, I ran out of steam and stopped speaking. During the unceasing assault of my worries Fay had sat quietly, looking at me deeply, honoring my need to be heard.

She leaned to the side of her rocking chair and pulled out her tattered bible. She began to thumb through the pages until she came to the passage she was looking for. She assigned me the story from Matthew where Jesus collects his disciples and invites them to get into a boat. You remember the story. The weather gets unbelievably bad. As the boat is tossed around, the disciples are terrified, and they are horrified to discover Jesus asleep. Asleep on a pillow when they are quite convinced they are perishing. Fay told me to imagine myself in the scene during my prayer time and see what might bubble up.

These are the kinds of assignments I love. I like imagining a scene and seeing what it has to tell me about my current walk with God. I had prayed this passage before, even had an icon of the disciples gesturing to Jesus when he is asleep in the boat. As, I walked to the chapel, I jumped ahead in my mind, and assumed that I would find new energy to tell Jesus I needed him to wake up. That the storms were rough and I couldn't handle the weather. He would calm the seas, and I would find peace. But, as is often the case with this kind of prayer, what I thought would happen was not in the cards.

I found myself imagining the walk down to the shore. Tagging along behind the disciples, a bit recalcitrant, I could see the dust rising from their feet. When we got to the boat, in went Jesus. In went the disciples. Jesus looked at me and invited me to join them. I looked at him and said, "Nope. Sorry. Not able to go there today. I'll see you later." And I turned around, and went on my way, leaving Jesus at the dock.

There is something about consenting to be with Jesus that takes us places we are not always eager to go. No one knows this better than the disciples. In this morning's gospel lesson from Luke, we see them continue to respond to Jesus. Not long

ago, they have become fully authorized by him to go out and engage in ministry. They are to heal and cast out demons. A few days ago, Peter has confessed Jesus as Lord. The Messiah. Great they think, we are in the right place at the right time. Let the healing and exorcisms begin. We are on the winning team. We have found the Messiah and all of our dreams are about to come true.

Or are they?

As soon as Peter declares Jesus the Messiah, they are told of the suffering and rejection that awaits him. Hardly the answer they were looking for. They do not want to hear it. You imagine they hope he will just drop that piece and get on with it.

Jesus then goes to the mountain to pray, and invites Peter, John, and James. Maybe if they pray with him, they will come to understand what they are being asked to join.

But what happens? They fall asleep. The NRSV translation engages in a little political spin for our less than responsive disciples. It makes you think they are merely heavy lidded but still catch the essence of what is going on. The original text is pretty clear they actually fall asleep and only witness the glory a bit later. So do they miss the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah? When they are discussing the turn to Jerusalem, and the suffering that is to come to Jesus?

I suspect they did, or when they overheard something, they assumed it was only a bad dream. One that needed to be relegated to the realm of nightmares and things that go bump in the night.

Well, when you are not exactly sure what you should do in response to such an experience, you can always count on Peter. He knows something has happened, and suggests they build three dwellings. Is he hoping for a reappearance? Trying to create a cozy bed and breakfast, should the prophets choose to reappear?

Well, before he can begin planning the capital campaign, a cloud descends over them and proclaims that Jesus is no mere prophet, he is the chosen Son of God. And, they need to listen to him. Hearing the voice of God renders them silent, and they descend the mountain more confused than ever.

We often hear of mountain top experiences talked about as moments of wonder. Not of this world, glimpses of heaven that let us know there is something beyond what we feel in the ordinary experiences of our lives. They can sustain us in the times of dreariness, because they transcend the ordinary.

But this is not one of them. Wonder is replaced with wondering. A sense of awe feels rather awful, and they are mystified by what Jesus keeps telling them. They are hoping and expecting one thing, and he keeps giving them something else.

As much as we might hope otherwise, this is often how we experience the journey. We hear of tragedies we cannot explain, experience our own limits in uncomfortable ways, feel overwhelmed by the trials of our lives, and would rather just get off the tumultuous seas than deal with this Savior who is asleep and disciples who are clueless.

Or do we?

Well sure, some days we would rather just take a break. But then there are the other days, most days, when we know entering the mystery is the choice we have made as baptized people. We have joined with a community that has covenanted to join us in the journey, and carry us when we are not able to carry ourselves.

But why?

I think the answer really is at the bottom of the mountain in the midst of the nitty gritty. Jesus descends with Peter, John, and James and they come upon the very real situation of disciples who are unable to do what they want to do. Jesus does not emerge from prayer like a glowing beacon of hope and light. He actually seems a bit frustrated. What is next? How should they respond.

There is someone who knows what to do. A father, distressed about the suffering he sees in his child and the suffering that

is causing him. Perhaps the disciples were unable to heal the child because they were still trying to avoid the suffering. Skip straight to the cure. But, to engage fully in the healing of Jesus' glory, we have to accept the reality of his suffering and our own.

Jesus is frustrated the disciples can't always get there. He knows his time is short and their very salvation requires they confront the truth they would rather avoid. But it is not because we are failing to heal those around us that frustrates him. It is the way in which our avoidance cuts off the possibility of his healing. If we are not willing to get on the boat, how can he calm the seas? If we would rather build structures to contain mysteries we cannot understand, how can he be revealed as the Son of God?

Lent, which begins in just a few short days, gives us the chance to open ourselves to God's healing. To have the courage to engage in the parts of ourselves and our world we sometimes wish would just go away.

The second morning of my retreat, I returned rather sheepishly to meet with Fay. I admitted that I had turned on my heels and told Jesus to just be on his way without me. I laughed and said, "Well, I guess I'll have to wait for the next boat." She replied, "No you don't. He is still there waiting for you to return."

Amen