

BUILD THEM HOUSES?

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Text: Mark 9:2–9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my child, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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I wanted to write a sermon about change: about how change is hard yet inevitable; about how we generally want things to change but it’s so difficult to change ourselves. I was going to tell some lovely story about how much I have changed in the last 18 years and yet my spouse, Nora, still loves me. She married a young guy with dark, thick curly hair. She married an actor, and we planned to live a life together as theater artists. Yet now I am a minister with thinning gray hair who rarely steps on a stage. We had planned to move to New York and live our goals. Instead, we didn’t do that. I jokingly ask Nora if she would still have married me if she knew how we would have changed. She says “Yes” and then laughs. I love her laugh. I hope that, in all the changes in our life, that will never change.

I was going to make light of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’s transfiguration. Of course they were terrified! Their friend changed in front of their eyes; he was called the Son of Man by a voice from the heavens and was accompanied by two very dead, very important prophets. Of course, they were terrified! How would you have reacted?

I was going to try and wrap all this together with this lovely little story by Ann Lamott, which is still too good to not share. She writes: “It turned out this man worked for the Dalai Lama. And he said gently that they believe when a lot of things start going wrong all at once, it is to protect something big and lovely that is trying to get itself born-and that this something needs for you to be distracted so that it can be born as perfectly as possible.”¹

¹Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*

Wouldn't that have been nice? You could have learned a bit about me, we could have done some biblical exegesis together and tied it up with a beautiful story about something lovely being born out of chaos and change. What a lovely sermon I could have written. I was excited about that sermon.

But I couldn't piece it together. I moved paragraphs around, I rewrote, I washed dishes. I did all of the things that usually help me put my thoughts together. But I was distracted. I can't blame this distraction on pandemic fatigue or a restlessness from feeling stuck inside in this freeze. I can't blame it on the very long workdays. Like a dog on a leash, I was wanting to go one direction but was being pulled in another.

It was this passage from Mark. This transfiguration story kept tripping me up. It won't let me say what I want to say. It keeps asking me to address something that makes me uncomfortable and I want to avoid. It is asking me to confront its supernatural aspects and I didn't really want to.

This transfiguration passage is central to the Christian story. It is found in similar form in three Gospels and describes this mystical moment in which Jesus is revealed to be more than the Jesus his friends and followers thought he was. He is revealed to be special and shiny, the Son of Man and the inheritor of the prophetic mantle from Elijah and Moses. This story is magical—which I often try to avoid. It works against my logical nature. Oftentimes I just don't know how to translate these old sacred stories into our modern conversation when there are these magical, supernatural aspects to them.

I am drawn to the human Jesus, the prophet, the radical who teaches love. I am a follower of that Jesus who wasn't afraid to touch the sick or those that society marginalized. I lament the death of this man that the Empire killed out of fear. I mourn the murder of this one who tells us to love God and the other as we also must be loving ourselves. I understand this somehow. I understand this Jesus, and, while what God asks of us through him is difficult, I am more comfortable with that difficulty. I am uncomfortable with the supernatural of this transfiguration.

Which is exactly how these disciples must have felt. I am not suggesting that I think this story is literal, but I also can't just dismiss the possibility that something unexplainable and incredible happened to them. I have had experiences in my life that I can't easily give logic and reason to. I have witnessed and experienced unexplainable things. In high school I saw something fly in the air that I can't explain. I don't know why I didn't drown in the Mediterranean Sea, nor do I know who that guy was that saved me and then disappeared. I can't explain that voice that emerged in my head that one rainy day and gave me unexpected yet needed direction. I can't explain love. There is so much that I find unexplainable, so why do I want to dismiss this story so easily?

Which, again, is how these disciples must have felt. They witnessed something unexplainable. They also understood the human Jesus, which is why they were traveling with him and teaching with him and following him. They were finding comfort even in the difficulty of his teachings. Yet all of a sudden they were seeing something that changed everything. They were seeing something way beyond what they thought they were being a part of. And they were terrified . . . and rightly so.

I keep getting caught by this line of the text before it says how terrified they were. Peter says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

So, Peter blurts out this offer to Jesus to make three dwellings. This is before the text admits to us that Peter "did not know what to say, for they were terrified." Before he doesn't know what to say because he is terrified, he offers to build Jesus and the dead prophets houses. His first reaction is to help Jesus live on the mountain, this same Jesus to whom he had given up everything to follow. I am struck by this deep and loving kindness, this kneejerk reaction of care and comfort. Before he did not know what to say because he was terrified, Peter offered housing.

This unexplainable supernatural transfiguration, this disruption of everything that Peter thought he understood about Jesus, was met with loving kindness. What an amazing impulse! The disciples are often used as foils for Jesus in the Gospels. They are often depicted as not understanding or as getting things wrong. But here we see the true nature of these followers: They cared so much that the first reaction, even while terrified and not knowing what to say, was to provide a basic human need. He didn't ask for proof of need or wonder if this was all a trick, he didn't ask if the dead prophets deserved a home. Is that what I would have done? Would that have been my first reaction? Is that what you would have done?

I wonder, though, if this is what we are called to do, who we are called to be. I wonder if a foundational calling for us all is to build houses, both literally and figuratively, for those who may need it. We are called to practice the actions of our lives so that kindness is our default. It is our calling that even when presented with the unexplainable, we respond with generosity. It doesn't matter what the person's skin looks like, where they are from, whom they love, or what gender they may or may not identify with. It does not matter what their addiction may be, what they call their god, how many years they have lived or the worth that this commodification-society of ours has assigned them. They all—we all—deserve houses when we go through our big changes. We are all called to provide these basic human needs when we witness these transformative changes. It is not *if* these changes occur, but *when*. It does not matter whether these changes fit into our understanding or whether they seem implausible or unexplainable. We are called to build dwellings for each other so as to keep each other safe and warm and cared for. We don't have to understand it to be caring. We don't have to feel comfortable to be generous. We can be terrified and not know what to say and still give our gifts. This may be our foundational and habitual calling: to build houses for others that we would like them to build for us.

How we do this is as individual as each of us. But here is what I am asking you to try this week: First, try to give in to the awe and wonder of the unexplainable. I still don't think this story is literal, but it was only by giving in to the supernatural of it that I was able to find some meaning. Give in to the mystery of the world around you and let it change you. Second, work to have your initial impulse be one of kindness and care. Build dwellings for all that is in transformation within and around you. Keep practicing that. These may be difficult calls to action for this week, but I ask that you try to do so, even if you are also feeling like a dog trying to go another way on its leash. This week, may we practice being like Peter and offer dwellings to those experiencing transformative change. Go forth and live it.