

Heading Down the Mountain

Mark 9:2-9

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In years past, my Transfiguration Sunday sermon has focused on the mystical scene with Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all huddled in an other-worldly scene as the three disciples stand in awe. This time around, I decided to get into the minds and hearts of Peter, James, and John as they head back down the mountain. In preparing this sermon, I asked myself what they might have been thinking as they descended from the clouds and came back down to reality.

Having seen Jesus huddled with Moses, they identified Jesus as a teacher of moral authority. And having seen Jesus huddled with Elijah, they identified him as having a gift for speaking a prophetic word, a word of justice. In the Transfiguration, it becomes mightily clear to them just how gifted Jesus really is.

As they follow the path down the mountain, I picture them talking among themselves, naming for each other the spiritual gifts they recognize among them. If I listen closely enough, I can hear Peter saying to John, “You have a gift for being with people in times of crisis. We need that gift in the church.” I can hear John saying to James, “You have a gift for working with youth; you have a way of communicating in their language. We need that gift in the church.” I can picture James saying to Peter, “You have a gift for knitting. I’ve seen you knitting sweaters and mittens. We need that gift in the church.”

As they descend the un-named mountain, they leave behind the mystical experience of the dazzling white garments and head down into the trenches where life is real and raw and ragged.

These three disciples beg the question, ‘what is my spiritual gift?’ Or, ‘what is it God has given to me that the church desperately needs?’ It’s fine to be up there in clouds with Moses and Elijah for a little while, but the ministry of the church happens at the bottom of the hill where people are unemployed, where dementia robs people of their identity, where people are told by their oncologist they have six months to live, where a bank forecloses on a neighbor’s house, where a teen friend has an eating disorder.

So, as a way of getting everyone here to name your own spiritual gifts, I decided to tell three stories of people who have done just that, named their own spiritual gifts and then used them in some life-giving way.

Alexandra Scott, raised in Windsor, CT, was stricken at age four with a cancerous tumor wrapped around her spine. After chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant, she told her parents she wanted to set up a lemonade stand to raise some money. Her parents told her that wasn’t necessary, that they would buy her anything she wanted or needed. She told them the money wasn’t for her. She wanted to give it to her doctors so they could help other children with cancer. Thus was born Alex’s Lemonade Stand. Her goal was to raise one million dollars. She had decided that when life gives you a lemon, you need to make lemonade. When she died in 2004 at age 8, she had reached her \$1 million goal. As you know, children all across America are still making and selling lemonade. \$35 million has been raised for cancer research and for supporting families living with cancer.

One of the daughters of South Church works for Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation. So, I called Lisa Towry in Philadelphia and I asked her what Alex’s spiritual gift was. Lisa said, “Her compassion for other children.” She also had a knack for making a tasty pitcher of lemonade!

So, now, when I picture Peter, James and John coming down the mountain, I picture Alexandra Scott among them.

On Friday, I drove down to Wallingford to visit Randy LaRocca. As we talked in his room, a patient in a wheelchair was being pushed along in the corridor. Randy hollered for Zach to come on in and meet his reverend. Zach is a 19 year old quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. But the thing is: Zach is a talker, a persuasive talker. He had noticed there was a shortage of nurse's aides on their unit and he asked how they could increase the staff even by one aide. He was told that many patients would have to request such an addition before anything would happen. He was given a discouraging word. So, Zach proceeded to visit every patient on the floor and organized them all into an 'add an aide' coalition. And within a day or two, extra help had been deployed and patient morale had skyrocketed! On reflection, it wasn't so much that Randy wanted Zach to meet me; it was that Randy wanted me to meet Zach!

I asked Randy what he thought was Zach's special gift. Randy said, "He cares about people and he has a gift for gab." I hope there is a handicap accessible ramp down that Transfiguration Mountain because Zach is on that team with Peter, James and John, headed to those places where life is fragile.

I am sure I have introduced you to Jack Alison, affectionately known in Malawi as Bambo Jack. Jack was raised in North Carolina. He'd come home from school each day and pick out a melody on his guitar strings, maybe strum some chords, maybe compose some new tunes. When he joined the Peace Corps after college, he was assigned to the Ministry of Health and sent out to villages to teach nutrition to young mothers and to give inoculations to babies and to do whatever he could to improve the state of public health. At the end of each day, he'd pull out his guitar and start composing songs with health messages, in the

Chichewa language. He chose a rock 'n roll beat which was very popular at that time all across the country. And within a few months, Bambo Jack songs had made their way onto the radio and had reached the top ten favorite list. All over the country, Malawians of all ages were hearing and singing health songs to rock 'n roll music.

Ufa, ufa yamedza. Add ground nut flour to babies porridge.
Chiwayway. Chase the rabid dogs from the village.
Wipe the flies from your babies eyes.
Wash hands when coming from the latrine.

On the radio, in make-shift village theaters, in downtown parking lots, Jack Alison was using his spiritual gift for making music to transform forever a nation's health. Thirty years later, when the AIDS pandemic spread like prairie fire, the president of the country summon Jack back from America to write and sing a whole new set of Chichewa songs.

Along with Alexandra and Zach, along with Peter, James and John, I see Bambo Jack coming down the mountain, picking up the rear, singing that growing community from the lofty peak to the bustling villages. I see that tiny community of disciples growing from three to six, from six to six hundred, from six hundred to six thousand, to six million. Generation to generation, those who have been inspired by the life and passion of Jesus Christ are still naming their own spiritual gifts, still helping each other to name them, and then using those gifts to do God's work in the world.

That's where the text took me this week. As always, I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.

