

“God Is With Us”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Transfiguration Sunday – February 7, 2016

**Luke 9: 28-36**

Life is busy. Life is stressful. Life’s demands can cause us to lose perspective. Life is busy.

It’s at those times in life that we feel a compelling desire to get away, to take a break, to find time for rest and renewal. It might be a weekend away, by ourselves or with someone close to us. It might be a week of vacation to someplace special for us or for our family. It might be a day that is unscheduled, free of commitments, when we can simply “be.” It might be an extended break from work, or a time in-between jobs, when we can experiment and try new things that we wouldn’t otherwise attempt.

For me personally, I have learned the importance of Sabbath time as it impacts my physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Having one day a week that is set-aside as free from work responsibilities helps me keep a rhythm that is healthy and balanced as an individual, a husband, and a father. I have also sought to be intentional in how I space my time away from work – for vacations and professional development – so I do not go too long between those times of rest. I’ve realized, for example, that it’s not good for me to go three to four months without a Sunday off; it’s better for me to spread those times off in a more consistent way throughout the year.

I believe all of us know what that healthy rhythm is in our lives. When we feel we are out of that rhythm, certain things can suffer as a result. We can become so enveloped in our work, our families, or our day-to-day responsibilities, that we lose sight of those relationships that are most important in our lives. We can allow the smallest of things to set us off, because we are exhausted mentally, physically, or emotionally. Without the proper balance of work and rest, of activity and reflection, of giving of ourselves and taking time for renewal, we can fall into a trap that is unhealthy and even destructive.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Jesus, throughout his life and ministry, found times to get away from the crowds and seek rest and renewal. Often it is to be in conversation with his Father, and he models for us the importance of prayer in our spiritual lives. Sometimes the disciples don’t understand this need, and they rebuke him for abandoning them in times of crisis. Even at the end of Jesus’ life, he spends time alone in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, some final moments of solitude amidst very real and deep emotions with God.

If you look at all that has happened in Jesus’ life up until this point in Luke’s Gospel, it’s no wonder why he felt the need to take “Peter and John and James up on the mountain to pray” (9:28). After Jesus comes out of the

wilderness, rebuking the temptation of the devil, he does the following: he's rejected by his hometown of Nazareth; he heals multiple people in Capernaum and elsewhere; he calls the first disciples together; he defends his teachings from the challenges of the Pharisees; he preaches the Sermon on the Mount; he heals a centurion's servant and brings back to life a widow's son; he offers forgiveness to a woman who was chastised by others in her community; he teaches through parables; he calms a storm on the sea; oh, and he feeds five thousand people. Now, if you had done all of that – wouldn't you want to get away from it all for just a little bit?

Verity Jones is an executive vice president at Christian Theological Seminary here in Indianapolis, and she writes the following: *Peter, James, and John glimpse a bit of heaven up on the mountaintop with Jesus, according to Luke 9. With white lights and dazzling clothes, Jesus' face shines as brightly as the sun. Moses and Elijah are there as well – the great law-giver and the prophet who was expected to precede the Messiah. It's truly amazing, spectacular. A glimpse of heaven – high up on the mountaintop, far away from the chaos and devastation below.*

*It sounds wonderful, this mountaintop experience. What might change if we could find proof of something up there greater than ourselves, greater than the suffering world below, greater than the war and famine and violence and fear of this world? Or what if we could just escape the mess and muck of human life down here, if only for a little while?* (*Christian Century*, January 20, 2016: 21).

I don't know about you, but one of the things I hate about vacations is knowing that they will end. While I enjoy very much being away from work and engaging in activities with family and friends, I also find myself grieving the end of those times away. The last days of vacation mean we have to reenter the real world: the schedules, the work responsibilities, the messiness of life that we had escaped for a day, a week, or longer.

Whether it's a mountaintop experience such as a spiritual awakening or incredible God-moment, or simply some personal time away to recharge our emotional batteries, many of us can feel a sense of never wanting that "high" to end. And yet, the truth of the matter is that none of us – none of us – can ever fully escape what the real world brings with it. God did not create us to be on permanent vacation. God created us to be in engagement with one another and with our world.

Jones continues: *When Peter sees Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus on the mountaintop, he offers to build three dwellings for them, a memorial to them. He wants to honor and preserve the moment forever.*

*But God stops Peter in the middle of his sentence: "While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them." God redirects Peter: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" God cuts Peter's transcendental moment short and points to Jesus in the flesh, God's Son on earth. When the others look up again, the bright lights are dimmed. Moses and Elijah are gone. There is only Jesus, in flesh and blood, fully human, there in the mess of their fear*

*and trembling, comforting them, preparing to endure the trials and tribulations of human life.*

*God is with us. Even though I have not experienced a mountaintop revelation, I can know that my God is near – down here, in the midst of my messy life. This Jesus, our Savior, did not escape even from human death. He chose to suffer the cruelty of crucifixion rather than escape to a mountaintop closer to God.*

*Peter, James, and John are not the same after this revelation. They come back down from their mountaintop experience into the cruel world that will kill their friend and leader, but they are changed by their experience. When Jesus was transfigured before them, the disciples caught a vision, a glimpse. They heard a voice. For one moment the tough crust of mundane reality was peeled back, and they saw Jesus as the long-promised Christ, the one sent from God to save them. When they walked back down the mountain, they walked into a very different world.*

*These mystical moments, when the curtain of the divine is pulled back and someone gets a glimpse, can change the way the rest of us see and experience the mundane world around us (ibid).*

We are not called to be disciples of Jesus Christ only on the mountaintops. We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ down in the valleys, down in the messiness, down in the real world. We catch glimpses of the divine on the mountaintops, and we are tempted to do as Peter suggested, memorializing those moments as the new standards of our everyday spiritual lives. But when we are tempted to do that, God points to the one being transfigured, and says to us, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And we are reminded that our Lord is Emmanuel: God with us.

When we walk back down the mountain, and our dysfunctional families cause us stress beyond measure – we are not alone, for God is there, walking alongside us.

When we walk back down the mountain, and our financial worries cause us to think in unhealthy, destructive ways – we are not alone, for God is there, walking alongside us.

When we walk back down the mountain, and our emotional capacities are challenged due to incredible need all around us – we are not alone, for God is there, walking alongside us.

When we walk back down the mountain, and we are wounded by indifference and self-centeredness by those we love – we are not alone, for God is there, walking alongside us.

As we prepare to begin our Lenten journey this week on Ash Wednesday, may we take incredible solace and strength in the knowledge that God’s Chosen, Our Savior, walked back down the mountain into our messiness, so that we might be redeemed through his boundless grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.