

## **"Calling Us Down From The Mountain"**

The Reverend Lucy Crain

**Date:** February 11, 2024



I was lucky enough last weekend to travel to East Tennessee to visit my mother for a few days. Some of you may know the route I follow: 85 South to Gastonia, 321 to Morganton, pick up 181 to drive over the mountain through Linville, and finally, a left turn onto 19E will take me all the way into the Tri-cities. After 30 years of living in Charlotte, this trip is as familiar to me as the drive to the Cotswold Harris Teeter and I often make it on auto-pilot, not paying much attention to the gorgeous vistas around me. However, do you REMEMBER last Saturday?? It was absolutely a perfect day for a mountain drive. The sun was brilliant in a Carolina blue sky and I could not resist the luxury of pulling over for a few minutes, about half-way through the trip, at the Brown Mountain Overlook. On days like that, the scene from the overlook takes my breath away and I am always reminded of the majesty of our Creator on the rare occasions I take the time to stop and view it.

It can be the same feeling as when I am in Montreat, North Carolina. I know many of you have been there and the PW ladies are excited about a women's retreat there in the coming months. Often when I am visiting, I am also attending a retreat or a conference that is rigorously scheduled. Even breaks are filled with conversations with colleagues as we have important ministry to discuss. However sometimes, when I am lucky enough - or disciplined enough - I find time during a busy week to hike up Lookout Mountain. There is this spot, when you get all the way to the top, where you can sit on a flat rock and look out over the valleys for miles in every direction. I can sit there for a long time and just stare at the beauty of it all... Now, let me share with you a little secret about your new pastor: I am not an early bird so I have never seen the sunrise from the top of Lookout as some of you may have witnessed. However, I HAVE hiked down the mountain with a flashlight several times after watching the sun go down behind the ridgeline. The sunset from the top of Lookout is a thin space for me.

Some of you may know the term "thin space." It is often used to describe a place where the divide between the earthly realm and the heavenly realm is so thin it becomes blurred and humans can catch glimpses of the divine. Your personal thin space might not be in the mountains like mine. Some of you "beach folks" might experience a revelation of our Creator walking through the surf and gazing at the vastness of the ocean. Closer to home, some might sense the presence of God sitting on your back deck, with the sun on your face... perhaps watching the breeze blow through the autumn leaves or seeing the buds of early daffodils as they push up from the melting snow. These precious moments, or revelations of the divine, are personal for each of us and they are a gift from God when we are willing to receive them.

Peter, James, and John in our passage today experience what some might define as the ultimate "thin space." Jesus literally took them up to a high mountain where they certainly encountered something of the divine as he was transfigured before them. Our text describes his clothing as "dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them." Mark wants to emphasize that no amount of human effort, bleach, or earthly product, could produce what was happening on that mountain. It was only possible by the power of God at work and the three disciples were lucky enough, or disciplined enough, to witness the majesty of it all. If there was any doubt about what was on display that day, that was finally erased by a voice from the clouds proclaiming, "This is my son."

This moment in the gospel of Mark, occurring halfway between the baptism of Jesus and the account of his death and resurrection, is indeed central to Mark's proclamation of the good news. The first 8 chapters of the story are full of secrecy and mystery with Jesus commanding the unclean spirits not to declare him and the witnesses of his miraculous healings not to reveal him to others. Even the account of Jesus' baptism in this gospel states the voice from heaven spoke to Jesus alone - "YOU are my beloved Son... not HE is my beloved Son." Afterwards, when Jesus begins his earthly ministry, healing after healing occurs, but the question remains as to who Jesus really might be...

In the chapter before this mountain top journey, Jesus feeds the multitude and restores sight to a blind man. However, despite what they have witnessed, the disciples are still in heated conversation, as some state Jesus is John the Baptist or Elijah or simply another prophet. Peter called him the messiah when asked directly but you'll notice in our text, before the Lord speaks, Peter addresses Jesus again simply as rabbi or teacher. It is as if Peter is still not quite so sure.

The transfiguration account in Mark's gospel, with the unnaturally brilliant clothing and the authoritative voice of God, puts the identity question firmly to rest. Jesus is indeed the one hoped for. One commentator describes the moment as a bit "exhibitionistic" on God's part - but God was making a point and Mark is firmly answering the primary question of his entire text: Yes, Jesus is the one.

Now that the question of Jesus' identity is established, what does God say next? "Listen to him!" Let's imagine for a minute that we are Peter or one of the disciples in this story. The God we worship and adore, who we have given up our normal lives to follow, has illumined his son before us and told us from the cloud to stop our babbling about tents and listen. The text doesn't say so, but I suspect this was not the "still small voice" of God but rather a booming, commanding voice. I don't know about you but I

would hush and wait expectantly for what comes next... for what Jesus is about to say. I imagine Peter and his buddies went still to hear the direction from our Lord. And then.... nothing...

Pen spoke a few weeks ago, when beginning our exploration of Jesus in Mark's gospel and his journey to the cross, about how we are not privileged enough to hear much of what Jesus actually taught. Mark proclaims the authority of Jesus' teachings but doesn't share with the reader what those teachings actually were. However, Jesus spoke loudly with his life - with his actions. Pen mentioned that Jesus' teachings were his fellowship with the marginalized and his compassion for those in need. In today's passage, Jesus is continuing his leadership with his actions and not his words. Peter longed to stay on that mountain where the glory of the Lord was abundant and clear but Jesus simply went silent and led his companions down the mountain. They would then spend the next two chapters of this gospel making their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus would offer the ultimate gift of love for God's creation.

Thin spaces, or mountain top experiences as some people call them, are definitely important to our life of faith. We all need personal time to experience the glory and power of the divine. Anna spoke last week about how Jesus slipped away early in the morning for a quiet time of prayer, to put his own spiritual oxygen mask on first, before returning to the business of ministry. We certainly all need to have those moments of divine embrace to equip us for the work of the kingdom. However, as Jesus taught us, we cannot stay on the mountain or on the shoreline. As safe and wonderful as they might be, the thin spaces are only intended for us to use for a brief sojourn, to fuel us for the work that God calls us to be about.

Let's look back at our scripture for this morning one more time and how the characters used THEIR sojourn with the divine. We have briefly considered this passage from the perspective of the disciples and for the purposes of God, but what about Moses and Elijah? Why are they included in the story? Some will say it is only because these two Old Testament prophets both experienced previous mountain top encounters with their God. However, I might suggest they are included because they did not use those encounters to stay comfortable in the presence of their Creator. Instead, both figures used their previous divine revelations to energize them into service for others. Moses and Elijah both turned away from the luxury of a possible royal court position available to them. Instead, they chose to stand up and speak out against the established order of the day that kept some of God's precious children oppressed and marginalized.

Perhaps out of respect for these great prophets, while on the mountain, Peter wishes to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to remain in the safety of their luminous presence. It is glorious

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there, with the beautiful views and the comfort of like-minded people. Peter sometimes gets a bad rap in the re-telling of this story, but who wouldn't want to stay on that gorgeous mountain top and rest in the company of the divine? Have you ever, even one-time, driven away from Montreat not wishing you could stay for just another day? I always do. However, God commands the disciples to listen and their Lord is speaking with his life. Jesus could have also remained on that mountain in the safe company of his followers but he knows his fate is in Jerusalem. Jesus is headed to the cross and asks that those who love him, who worship who he is in the world, follow him in the way of sacrificial giving.

Recently I was able to serve alongside some wonderful volunteers at one of our scheduled Room in the Inn nights. If you are not familiar with Roof Above's Room in the Inn offering, it is an emergency shelter overflow program where churches across the city open their doors to unsheltered neighbors in the winter and we serve at First Presbyterian every Monday night. This particular evening, one family had taken on the task of hosting dinner and there were three generations serving together and engaging in table fellowship with our guests. There was lively conversation and children running around to the unexpected delight of folks who most likely spent their day fretting about where they would sleep or where they might receive their next meal. Before dinner, one of the guests offered the most beautiful blessing, thanking God for the meal, the warm bed, and the lovely fellowship. She told me later she was a prophetess, and I do not doubt it for a minute. We had a wonderful evening of conversation and the Holy Spirit was definitely on the move in that space, and I was lucky enough, or disciplined enough, to witness it.

As part of our communal worship on Sundays, when diving into scripture, our task is to discern together what relevance the text has for us today. I think the easy part for this morning is seeing we need to be lucky enough, or disciplined enough, to visit our personal thin spaces, away from the bustle of our everyday world. We all need to experience God's glory revealed in the majesty of creation. Perhaps the harder question is how do we listen and follow Christ's example into the city? Where is God already on the move and are we listening to him? Where do we find thin spaces in the messy work of the kingdom? How are we acting out our church's mission statement to be "For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte?" I think that is the issue our passage today calls into question. As we look towards the season of Lent, how are we supporting Christ's journey to the cross with our actions and showing our love for those whom God loves. May we all be lucky enough - or disciplined enough - to do so.

All thanks be to God.