

Matthew 16:24-17:8
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Holy Ground

Following last week's text, Jesus continues to heal the sick and teach the crowds and rankle the religious elite. He once again feeds thousands from a few loaves and fewer fish. Jesus continues to be on the move running up against the Pharisees and Sadducees as he goes. Once he arrives in Caesarea Philippi he asks the gathered disciples who people say that he is. The disciples tell him that some people think he is Elijah or John the Baptist come again. But Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the Living God, and Jesus rejoices, asserting that such belief is the very foundation of the church. Jesus then shares the first passion prediction. He tells them that the Son of Man, the Messiah, Jesus himself will soon suffer at the hands of the religious authorities, be killed, and then raised after three days. And Peter protests, causing Jesus to call him a stumbling block and satan. This one who moments before is on the receiving end of Jesus' praise is now the one who is rebuffed for not understanding who Jesus is at all. [Read Matthew 16:24-17:8]

Holy ground. That time on that mountaintop is time on holy ground. Removed from the rest of the world is the sacred space where the disciples witness God's breaking in and for a moment everything becomes clear. It is extraordinary, and unlike anything they have witnessed before. Matthew's gospel—along with Mark's and Luke's—tries to find the words to describe what happens. Jesus' appearance is changed somehow. His face shines. *Transfigured* is the word they use. But Jesus is still Jesus. This one who has fed thousands and called the ragtag group of disciples into ministry and calmed the storm is the same one speaking with Moses and Elijah, two figures from the Hebrew bible that point to the coming of the Messiah. This momentous occasion gives Peter an idea. He'll build tents or shrines for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Maybe he

is trying to dig in and camp out, to stay here surrounded by this other-worldly cloud, or maybe he simply wants to find a way to mark the place where something unheard of occurred, the moment when God made all of it clear. Can we blame him?

God interrupts Peter, of course, and tells them that this Jesus is God's Son, the beloved, just as God declared earlier at Jesus' baptism. At the baptism it is unclear whether anyone other than Jesus hears God's voice. Here on the mountain the disciples hear God speak, too. They fall on their faces in fear, until Jesus lays his hand on them and tells them to stand up, or "be raised," as the Greek reads. And they see him standing with them; the one who spoke with Moses and Elijah, the one whom God declared to be the beloved Son, this Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is standing right there with them still. Jesus will go on to tell them to tell no one what they saw for a while, but I wonder if they could even find the words if they tried?

One of the gifts of my job is that I stand on holy ground on a fairly regular basis, simply because of the role I serve. I am invited in to pray at bedsides in the ICU, to cradle newborns, to listen to parents who agonize over their children, to witness children who worry about what is best for their parents, to hold space for spouses who have reached a difficult place in their marriage, to sit with those for whom the road has grown dark, and to celebrate over coffee with college students who have found their passion. And in those places, in those moments, I am privileged to witness God at work offering love, compassion, truth, joy, and grace. And I am able to see it and name it because of what I have learned and shared and witnessed within the community of faith. What I share with you and see in you and hear from you helps me see God out there, God at work in the larger world.

On occasion, I get a call from someone like Kathy, who asks if she can come talk to me and share something she has experienced, a moment when she felt the presence of God in a

heightened or a new way. And on occasion someone like Kathy feels called to share what she has seen. Our tradition has often shied away from something other traditions call *testimonies*. But without the testimony of those who came before us, without their courage to see and name a God who gets involved in the ordinariness of human life, we would not have scripture, nor would we have the precious inheritance of a living faith. Because faith is more than words on a page. Yes, we can spend our energy trying to explain things and reduce them to rational explanations, but proof, reason, and rational explanations are not the only stuff of a living faith. A living faith is not afraid to ask questions or wonder why, but faith also calls on us to have the courage and brashness to accept and proclaim that not everything can be pinned down and explained, to remind us that God is as close as our breath and more mysterious than the stardust flung here from distant galaxies. Faith changes how we see the world around us, changes how we relate to others; simply put, faith changes us. And when we find words to share our faith, to witness to what we have seen and known, perhaps by the grace of God and the work of the Spirit, others are changed, too. I know I am. Because in those moments, I am reminded that we stand on holy ground, always. It is easy to forget; life speeds by and busyness so easily consumes us. There are bills to be paid; errands to be run; families to be fed; homework to be finished; and jobs to do. So if faith is going to change us, if our faith is going to change the world, we need reminders that God shows up in ways that do not make sense and at times when nothing makes sense.

The meal before us is one such reminder. It is not a glowing cloud; we will likely not hear the voice of God thundering through the skylight. But like a bright out-of-season yellow flower, this simple meal of bread and juice breaks into our everyday routine and reminds us that we stand on holy ground, always. It points us to that holy ground moment when Jesus broke bread with confused and frightened disciples before his arrest. This meal reminds us of that table

on the road to Emmaus when grieving disciples shared a meal with a stranger and found their eyes opened as the bread was broken in front of them. It points us to that promised feast when we will sit with all of God's beloved around a table, sharing a celebratory meal. And it tells us that God in Christ meets us here, that the holy is here in the midst of us still, too. It reminds us that the sacred is not tucked away in a locked away shrine. It reminds us that holiness is not contained in ancient Palestine 2000 years ago. It reminds us that God's holiness has been turned loose in the world, and that this holiness calls us to help one another see the world in a different way, to remember that God promises enough for today, for us and for all. It calls us to remember *how* God insists on saving the world, not through bluster and power grabs but through giving, sacrifice, mercy, and love. It reminds us that God shows up not only in a glowing cloud on a long ago mountain, but in hospital rooms and in hotel hallways, in the quiet of a snowdrift and the whirlwind of a preschool classroom, in the loneliness of a room in assisted living and the bustle of a grocery store, in the anxiety of a doctor's waiting room and in a tucked away corner of a quiet church garden on a weekday afternoon. It reminds us that God is with us still.

When we see a spark of beauty or hear a whisper of hope or witness an act of self-giving sacrifice, can we be certain that the God of the Universe has broken in? Maybe not, but when we are poised to look for the ways of God, the work of redemption, promise, hope, mercy, justice, love, and life, I am convinced that we will see that we, too, are standing on holy ground. I am convinced that we will catch a glimpse of God in our midst everywhere we turn. And perhaps we will even hear the Son of God say to us, "Get up; be raised; I am with you, always."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.