

Can't Capture Glory  
Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler  
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Exodus 24:12-18  
Matthew 17:1-9

Every day I listen to my child pretend. From any corner in any room she can create a crowd. As I hear her performing voices, high and low, and testing out words that I did not even realize she knows as she enacts the scenarios in her mind, I have to say I am a little envious. I still remember the last day I did these sorts of things on my own. I cannot say how old I was. But I was in the living room with my mom, and I was talking to myself, making elaborate stories using the voices of the characters in my head. In a moment of self-awareness, I remember that day thinking to myself, in the middle of my imaginary dialogues, "I wonder if Mom thinks it is weird that I am talking out loud." I looked over at her and decided I would keep my stories to myself. And I did. I wonder if my mom noticed that point of transition. I wonder if she lamented the loss of such openness and possibility.

Jesus said that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." For that reason I try to slow down in my adult ways and make space from time to time to pretend with my daughter. Yesterday, we spent quite a while making our fingers into little people that could talk to each other. No props necessary, only the bending of our fingers at their upper joints and accompanying them with interesting voices. She was delighted, as our finger-people played soccer. designed magical outfits, and went adventuring together.

I want to invite you to suspend reality for a few minutes and go on an adventure. I ask that you pretend for a few minutes that you are Peter. You are Jesus' disciple, the one who was named Simon but given a more important name, Peter. Today, you are Peter. After a series of missteps,

you are trying once again to make Jesus proud, to see that he is glad you are his disciple. First, you had followed Jesus out onto the water. But the tremendous faith you thought you wanted to show faltered once you realized what you were actually doing. With the first gust of wind, you were treading water and sputtering on the stormy waves until Jesus reached out his hand to you. Then, while trying to probe the wisdom of Jesus' mysterious parable about the stray plants being uprooted, you asked him what it meant. Jesus cocked his head at you and said, "Are you still without understanding?"

You recognized something holy in Jesus and could not hold back while others were trying to pinpoint who Jesus really was. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" you blurted out. Jesus then promised you the keys to heaven, and told you, "Peter, you are the Rock on which I will build my church!" But then, after Jesus shared with his disciples that he would undergo great suffering, be killed, and be raised again, you grabbed Jesus and rebuked him: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Jesus' response to you really stung: "Get behind me, Satan!"

You had to figure it out. What would you be to Jesus? Just another one of the disciples? The Rock, as your name *Peter* means in Greek? or Satan? You decide to stick close to Jesus and learn everything you can from him. So when he asks you and James and John, the Zebadee brothers, to follow him up a mountain early in the morning, you go without hesitation. What mystery would Jesus reveal up there? You set out before sunset with the boulders still awash in moonlight. Except for your footsteps crunching on gravel and sand, the air is still. As you rose up the mountain, the shadows changed. Light shifted, night yielding into the promise of day. Birds chirped their day's greeting to one another.

At last the 4 of you reach the mountain's summit. The sea of Galilee starts to sparkle below you with the reds and oranges of the rising sun. Jesus perches upon a boulder and takes the position of prayer. You see James and John each find a spot nearby and begin praying too, but you take Jesus' side, and imitate his posture. What is he praying? You try to calm

your wondering mind and open to God's presence. Right when you start to feel your body settle into peace, you feel the warmth around you change. You open your eyes and Jesus is no longer beside you. You gaze over to James and John, and see their heads turned. You follow their gaze and are almost blinded by the light. It is not the sun, which is in the opposite direction, but it is Jesus, and his face is as bright as the sun. His clothes, a dazzling white. Your eyes hurt as you study him so you look away, and that is when you see Moses, and Elijah too. Though they lived hundreds of years before you, you are certain, it is Moses the liberator, the bearer of the Torah, and Elijah, the prophet. You see them speaking with Jesus. You consider the name Jesus gave to you, Peter, my rock on whom the church is built. You jump up from the boulder and yell, "I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!" You think here, high on this mountain, I can keep Jesus. I can make him safe. Yes, here is the church I must build!

And then a voice cracks through the heavens, "This is my son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" In an instant you are huddled next to James and John, cowering in fear. All you can see is the gravel; you can feel the heat of your friends near you. You notice your friends smell already like the day. You realize you are holding your breath and as you start to breathe again you feel a hand on your back. Jesus. He looks ordinary again and he says, "Get up and do not be afraid." Moses is gone. Elijah is gone. Jesus begins to follow the trail back down the mountain, and you and the brothers fall into line behind him. "Better to not tell anyone else about this until after the Son of Man is raised from the dead," Jesus says.

You repeats these words over and over inside your head. Again Jesus has spoken of his death. You imagine what fine houses you could have built for Moses, for Elijah, for Jesus. A church of houses! A place where Jesus could be kept safe from the dangers awaiting him at the bottom of the mountain. A house where you could hold on to Jesus' glory forever. A church that would protect Jesus even from his death. You want so much to protect this man you love and serve.

You hear a voice once more, but this time it doesn't crack through the heavens. It speaks softly, inside of you. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" You start to hear more voices, outside of you, and see that the mountain trail has flattened, and people are passing by as they bring their goods to the Marketplace. Soon Jesus will belong to the crowds once again, crowds that will love him and crowds that will kill him. You remember the light on Jesus, from Jesus, that you witnessed at the mountain's peak. You recall how his face shone, how his clothes dazzled. You decide, if I cannot always have Jesus at my side, I will find a way to carry some part of that light he showed me, and I will find some way to show that light to others. You whisper beneath your breath, "God help me. God fill me with light."

Okay, you can stop pretending. You are not Peter; you are the same person you were when you entered the sanctuary today. Maybe like Peter, you came hoping to feel close to Jesus today and understand him more. Maybe, like Peter, you are fearful and confused and struggle, feeling at times a close intimacy with the holy, and at other times a fearful distance. Perhaps you have come with some piece of your life that you want touched by God, as much as Peter desired nearness to Jesus. How many of you carry fears and concerns that have gone unspoken today, but which you wish God would know about? Raise your hand if you are a carrier of unspoken prayers.

Maybe you are the same person you were when you entered the sanctuary today. But maybe you will leave a little different. Like Peter, who witnessed the transformation of Jesus, from his ordinariness to his dazzling brilliance, from his existence on his own to his standing together among Moses the Liberator and Elijah the prophet, you can open yourself to seeing God's glory as not just captured in a building, but as something that surrounds you, follows you, and shines from within you. Maybe your bit of transformation will move you from a place of isolated individualism to a recognition of the intimate community to which God calls us. Perhaps your transformation includes a hope for Christ's church as not in a removed,

isolated building that keeps Jesus separate and safe, but as something that dares to enter and be part of a fearful and complicated world, and bear Christ's light within it. Maybe your transformation is some recognition that *you* may be called to be a bearer of Christ's light.

A story I learned from the early desert fathers and mothers of the Christian Church: Two monks, Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said, "Father, as much as I am able, I keep the rules of our order. I fast. I pray and meditate and sit in contemplative silence. As much as I am able, I cleanse my mind and my thoughts. Now what more shall I do?" The elder monk rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said, "Why not become like fire?"

I invite you now to open your hands, palms up, so that you are looking at your fingers. Eyes open, pray with me:

Holy God, help us to not set limits on your glory. Help us to not set limits on your love for us, or on what you can do with us. Bless us with your glory-- not to be captured, but to be shared-- that we might receive, and shine with, the light of Christ. Fill your church with light, and help us to share that light with the world. Amen.