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Matthew 17:1-9

I adored Gordon, my spiritual teacher and mentor, and I would have willingly followed him up a mountain. But if instead of saying, "Becca, we are going to be developing new forms of church life through which the Spirit can end poverty," Gordon had said, "Becca, I will be arrested, suffer torture, die at the hands of church leadership and then rise again on the third day," I can't imagine what my reaction would have been. Without a context for that kind of comment, my adoration would not have translated to comprehension, and certainly not to collaboration. I'm glad he didn't say it. Mainline American Christians adore Jesus and may be willing like Peter, James, and John to go with Jesus up a mountain, but when it comes to following him, most of us do not have the perspective to understand what Jesus is asking of us.

At the end of Matthew 16, just before the transfiguration in Chapter 17, Peter can't get his mind around the implications of following Jesus. Here's a recap:

- Jesus: *"Who do you say I am?"*

- Peter: *"The anointed one."*

- *"Good answer – Full disclosure: The anointed one will suffer."*

- *"I don't want to hear that."*

- *"I don't want you not to hear that. So let me be clear, in case you didn't hear that: If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, accept the means of shaming, torture and capital punishment which will be used against them, and follow me." ...*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of esteemed religious leadership, be killed and on the third day be raised from the dead.

The disciples must have been unnerved and confused. Nevertheless, Peter, James and John head up the mountain where God hangs a neon flashing arrow from the sky, pointing to Jesus. Jesus' clothes turn white. He glows. He confers with his long-gone

forbears. At that, Peter becomes distracted by the thought of building sukkot huts, which again would honor the anointed one, but miss the point. He was apparently going on about the huts for a while because, "while he was still talking," the cloud overcame them and the voice delivered its message: If it's your intention to follow Jesus, shut up for a minute. Listen to him.

During the civil rights movement, things came to a head in such a way that would-be followers had a clearer context. Dr. King and others framed the issues so that activists knew what was at stake, what non-violent strategy was in play, the intended outcomes, and the potential personal cost. But in this present political moment, we have not framed our circumstances in a way that necessitates introspection or bravery, that calls on us to sacrifice strategically for the sake of the greater good, or that identifies clearly what we're up against or where we want to go. Instead, we have oversimplified and over-vilified a small handful of people as if they were the problem.

There **are** people in power who are a problem, but that group is not **the** problem. **The** problem is not new. **We** are the problem. The problem is that we bail out the rich and exploit the poor, and that we have done so for centuries. The problem is that our faulty practice of capitalism is insatiable and has collapsed into our faulty practice of democracy. The problem is that we bomb innocents and start wars. The problem is that we are more interested in celebrity news than in consequential concerns. Out of millions of citizens, the problem is that we put two undesirable candidates on our ballot. The problem is that we defer to a violent, unsustainable system and lack the wherewithal to forge other creative options. The problem is that we are quick to blame and slow to confess. Sure, it would be comforting to get certain people out of power, but **we** are the ones who need to change.

The problem is deep and entrenched. It is racism. It is greed. It is idolatry. It is a raging beast and it is our capacity to pretend it isn't there. To address the problem, to follow Jesus, to bear the kingdom, to reckon with the devil, there will be blood. And, like Peter, we don't want to hear it. There will be blood when we stop the tit-for-tat game of

distractions, when we put down our end of the tug-of-war rope, when we withdraw from an economy that diminishes its people, and when we write into a new infrastructure a value system that honors everybody while simultaneously loving those who deny that very premise.

This is a crazy time. Our ordinary dysfunction is trumped by extraordinary dysfunction: Executive orders. Pharisaic hypocrisy. Heads on platters. Coronations, deportations. Media bias, fake news: What is truth? The mountaintop is consumed with clouds. Visibility is zero. Golden calf parties rage below. Jesus is not pointing in a clear direction from his perch, except toward the inevitability of the cross. And the voice is saying, "Listen to him." But if we stick to Jesus' way of the cross, disabusing the present system of its power and wealth, there will be consequences. It won't be pretty.

King succinctly said we would not win the struggle through our capacity to inflict violence in anger, but through our capacity to endure violence in love. Can you hear that? Can you live it? Can I? Most importantly: Are we, together, as one body, prepared to bear all things when the conflict we haven't named yet comes to a head? Where will adorers of Jesus stand when we are up against loss of life, wealth and prestige, when things turn violent and the rooster crows?

Like Peter, we are not ready to follow. We would rather indulge distractions than listen. Yes, we are concerned and vocal, but we are also complacent, self-righteous, in denial and scared. I am saying this with sadness, not condemnation: As the body of Christ, our capacity for unbounded love and love's corollaries of freedom and creativity are severely stunted. The present day American Church may be increasingly politically astute, but we are not spiritually mature enough to drink from the cup. We are not prepared to sacrifice or suffer with joy and gladness and to follow Jesus on the saving way of the cross.

Except to pray and work for the renewal of the Church, I don't have a solution for that. But as we face into Lent, it seems important that we be honest about it; that we

acknowledge our limitations. Rather than saying with Peter, "I'll stay with you until the end, Lord," and then denying him repeatedly under pressure, better to confess our desperate need of the Holy Spirit to break our hearts, to overwhelm us with a sense of unity even with those we deplore, to deliver us from dependence on the world's systems, to embolden us in faith and to give us joy to sacrifice for the greater good. Just there, honest about our limitations, good news is given: That we won't listen, that we can't understand, does not deter Jesus.

Lent begins on Wednesday. For the next six weeks, even if we can't listen well or act accordingly, we can watch Jesus in awe, and take in anew his faithfulness on his way to the cross. Watch him do what we can't or won't. Watch Jesus call out sin and forgive us. Watch him wash feet and plead with his friends to stay awake and pray. Watch him befriend the enemy. Watch him reveal that the enemy is us. Watch him suffer physically, emotionally. Watch Jesus surrender, and in surrendering, redeem.

When we recognize our own limits, the limitlessness of Jesus is put in new perspective. We see more vividly Jesus' love, his vision, his willingness to suffer even for those of us unwilling to follow. During Lent, as Fr. Boyle and his Homeboys say, we can "marinate in that."

What we cannot do to save ourselves, Jesus does to save us. We are lost in the clouds these perplexing days, but Jesus' reckoning with powers and principalities turns this sin-sick world on its head, then and now. For our sake, he sets his face toward Jerusalem and opens himself to the love that transcends every limitation.

From the cloudy and confusing apex, the way of the cross is laid out before Jesus and he is sticking to it. As his Church, adoring but conflicted, object of his love, let's shut up for a minute. Watch. Marinate. Listen to him.

Amen.