

IS THIS ANYTHING?

Luke 9:28-36

February 27, 2022

I should let you in on a little-known habit of occasional preachers before I share this morning's scripture. When we finally get into the pulpit after a hiatus, we have an almost irresistible temptation to cram a year's worth of sermons into one. But you have been spared this morning. There will only be one sermon today...from me anyway.

Here's the gist: *What are we to make of everything that's been going on?*

I am aware today, as you are, that half a world away, and truly, in every corner of the world, there are people who do not yet know what the morning will bring, let alone tomorrow. And yet many of them rise each day with hearts of love for their neighbor and courage to stand up for what is right.

And in their midst, God's kingdom begins to unfold. May we be among them. Let us hear what God's spirit is saying to us today.

[Luke 9:28-36]

Since the year 2014, I have served as staff of a national movement known as the 1001 New Worshipping Communities. My colleagues and I, among other things, gather folks from around the country and the world to dream about the church and to carry out new ways of being the church. There are now over 650 of these communities in almost every conceivable context throughout the country, from New York City to Casper, Wyoming. And now, even on Zoom. When we stopped gathering in person for a long period of time during the pandemic, like many of you, we found ourselves in Brady-Bunch-style squares on our computers. We had to get creative again.

That's when my colleague, Jeff, introduced a little game he likes to call "Is this anything?" The inspiration for this game comes, you may know, from the famous comedian and Late Show host, David Letterman, native son of Indiana and no stranger to this sanctuary. Letterman had a recurring segment in his late-night show known as "Is This Anything?" Here's how it goes: The curtain rises on the stage. Letterman, and musician and co-host Paul Shaffer, witness something best described as a *random spectacle*.

Picture this. During one particular spectacle, a performer dressed like Minnie Mouse sits on the floor juggling behind her back, rhythmically, to the tune of Katrina and the Wave's 1985 hit "Walking on Sunshine."

Fifteen to thirty seconds pass, the curtain closes, and the hosts are left with this all-important question, the question we, the audience, have just got to have answered. The question: Is this anything? Or is it really nothing at all? Those are the questions.

I for one, would love to have a B-roll of this morning's transfiguration scenario playing up against the hosts of the Late Show. Curtains up, and we see Jesus of Nazareth flanked by a couple of friends on a mountaintop. Nice view. But *is it anything?* From the disciples' perspective, they've finally gotten away from the crowds. Perhaps they're thinking they want a break. Silent Contemplation. Please, Lord, no more exorcisms.

Sleepy, the disciples start to relax. And then, just as twilight descends on their rustic campsite, as the embers of the campfire glow red and the dew begins to cover the hillside, Jesus starts to literally glow and is now flanked by two of the most famous people of

all time: Moses and the prophet Elijah.

I can picture Shaffer and Letterman now. Can't you? After a period of stunned silence, they confer briefly with one another. *Okay, now THAT. THAT was something.*

This story of Jesus' transfiguration is distinct. It's as if the Holy Spirit is making a sign and gathering up the ancestors to make it even clearer. Flashing white lights! Glowing ancestors! This is something! Pay attention! Listen to him!

I think Jesus brought them up to the mountain to show them about this kingdom of God from a different vantage point. But I also believe Jesus understood, in watching them, that they needed to welcome that kingdom with wonder, tenderness, and intention.

The great mystic Howard Thurman once wrote that we must get away, we must leave community periodically to figure out how to return to it and to find our place, meaningfully, within it. Like the disciples, we need to get time on the mountaintop with Jesus, to pray with him, to watch our lives replay with honesty while we can still grow and be kinder. We need to reflect.

In the gospels, Jesus encounters people, and transformation occurs. People are freed. Sometimes the outer circumstances of their lives turn completely upside down. And when they do not, those who have truly met him and glimpsed his kingdom return to their same lives, their same chores, their same callings and relationships, but with new enthusiasm, greater vigor and more love than they possessed before. *That* is what beloved community gathered by Jesus in our midst does for us as well—a reorienting of priorities and relationships. The kingdom becomes a *kindom*, an interweaving of us that includes people, but also every living thing that is in the service of something, that cannot happen if we come alone with only *our agendas, our priorities, and our lists*. It is much smaller and gentler than that. It is much greater in

scope. It is cosmic.

Last weekend, Sam and I had the chance to take a trip to Florida. Postponed from spring of 2020, I was bringing not a kindergartener with me but a second-grade version of him, along with two of our best pals. That Sunday morning after a few cartoons and the donning of swimsuits, I had an idea for worship after the children had asked me with fearful reluctance, “Will we have church this morning, Mom?”

“Let's do it on the beach. I'll plan a little something,” I said, not knowing how the kids would react.

And almost immediately, Sam, used to his mother's prayer life, says, “I know what to do! I'm going to dig a hole in the sand, and I'm going to sit in it, and I'm going to be with God and all the beautiful seashells and listen to the calming waves and be so peaceful!”

“I'm going to decorate my place with shells!” Lynden says, joining him.

Our prompt was simple: find a few things here on the beach that call to your attention and create a little place for them in the sand. As they worked, a quietude ensued. Two mindful kids circling their fingers in the sand.

I hear Lynden call to me. “Sara, do you see what shape I made? I made a heart shape and a G, for God. And at my church we use the water like this,” and she mimicked the pitcher of water that she had learned from her home church. “So, I'm gonna use the sand like that,” she said. “I'm going to pour the sand like it's water... I'm ready to pray,” she told me.

“Okay,” I said. “Do you want to pray by yourself or do it all together?”

“I'll pray by myself.” I grew silent in that holy moment, watching her, holding space. I have learned not to take a child's prayer for granted. Then I heard her say, “I'm done.”

“Do you want to share anything about your prayer?” I asked her. I was not totally prepared for what she told me.

“I prayed,” she said, “that some people that are light-skinned for a long time have treated some people with dark skin like they are animals, and they’re not. And sometimes it still happens, and that’s wrong. That’s not how you treat each other, I told God. Help us to treat people the way they would like to be treated. And I thought of a name for my hole,” she continued. “Kindness. And treat other people the way they would like to be treated.”

We all did different things that morning. Sam, as he said, made a hole “big enough for God and at least one other kid and one adult.” I wasn’t sure who he was leaving out. “I’m just feeling so peaceful and thankful for the waves and the birds and the warm sand.”

What struck me is that that moment with God touched each of us in completely different ways. It took little bits, little revelations, from each one of us. A woman named Adrienne Maree Brown refers to these things as fractals, the experience of something unique to us that becomes a part of us and goes with us. It’s carried forward into each relationship, event, circumstance. On the beach, each of us had a way that felt open, in that moment, a little threshold under which to walk. That expression, united with the four of us, became a part of us. We carried it with us. We enfolded those experiences. They formed a part of us, our image, our essence, our testimony. God’s kingdom.

As we relaxed that morning near the waves, I was interested to see how passersby encountered our little altars. One young child shouted, “WOW! Look at this!” Others stepped over the circles or right on top of them, oblivious to the fine markings in the sand. I wondered to myself what I would have done if I were in that same position.

There is a quality to the word of God that really only becomes real to us when it takes space in us, in our lives, in our bodies, in our relationships, in our ordinariness, in our lowest points, in our triumphs. These words flow away from us in fractals toward others. Like great fashioners of quilts, each piece we place side by side together. It makes it easier to see,

and feel, and hear God’s kingdom.

Friends, in God’s kingdom, Jesus offers a way inside our hearts that takes us forward. One that is informed by the witness of our liberating ancestors. That transfiguration comes from a yearning and a sharpening inside of ourselves, not to “one up” one another with God talk, but to offer God’s gifts right back out to the world. And the tools that we put to the plow in the service to God’s kingdom are the things we practice treasuring.

We are on the precipice of Lent, an ancient observance that has been passed on lovingly through generations, and now it’s here with us. It is a time set apart for holy encounter. Neither you nor I nor Samuel nor Lynden have any idea how Christ will meet us along the way, but it will happen.

When we first moved to Indiana almost four years ago, I returned to my Midwestern roots. After 14 years in Atlanta, I had forgotten about the way the trees grow in cold places. I pulled a branch from a redbud on our front lawn and marveled physically at how the fuzzy plump buds were growing in a time of dormancy. I thought something was wrong with the tree. But in each of these fat ends lay the promise of springtime.

What might be growing in you? What do you want to feed, to honor, in your life? Among your friends? In your neighborhoods? What do you want to nurture?

I don’t have to tell you that in our present age in America, the culture is to injure rather than heal, to divide rather than unite, to one-up rather than come alongside. There is another way, and it is still dormant within us. All manner of things can grow. Hope. Rage. Wonder.

In the weeks to come, I invite you to wonder what is growing inside of you. Let us not turn away from the places in our hearts where Jesus is calling to us. In those places, we can decide there’s really nothing at all to see. Or we could come alive with the spirit’s help as if those places hold a key to exactly what we’ve been searching for all along.

Watch the children. They treat things with great tenderness and great mercy. Watch the elders; they do the same. We do not take miracles for granted until we are taught to do so.

Remember our siblings Peter, James, and John. They did not understand very much at all about the new world to which Jesus referred. But they were sent, nonetheless. They were sent and gathered and scattered and brought alongside Jesus who saw them fit enough to be a part of the unfolding of God's kingdom.

We are one body. And, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

Is this anything? This walk, this way, this love, this freedom? *Friends, it is everything.* Amen.