



Sermon

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

March 2, 2025

Luke 9:28-43a

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Please be seated.

[The preacher then sat down along with the congregation for a period of silent meditation. A small card had been distributed with the bulletins, saying:

Good morning, everyone!

This morning I would like to try something a little different and open my sermon with a long period of silence (a few minutes, actually). Use it for whatever you might like - centering prayer, a breathing practice, meditation, praying a rosary.

USUALLY when I am hosting silence, people know in advance what they signed up for. This morning, however, you are a captive audience who in no way agreed to this nonsense and might be wanting to run for the hills at the prospect of silence. You are not alone nor are you forgotten!

I'm bringing several copies of a Silent Practice Guide written by several members of the Canterbury House community. Feel free to thumb through and read. Maybe even try one out! (or grab a pen and make your shopping list for this afternoon - I won't know the difference and wouldn't even judge if I did).

Faithfully yours,

Matthew

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After 3-4 minutes of silence, the preacher stood up and started speaking.]

The last few years, I've been really grappling - personally, professionally, spiritually - with the fevered pitch it feels like the world is ever increasingly cast in. I don't think I need to explain much what I mean by that. I think we all kind of feel in our own ways that not only is the world around us cast in that fevered pitch, but it just keeps finding more and more peaks to hit every year—sometimes it feels like every day.

In the midst of that, among other places—including contemplative practice, which we'll get to a little more—I've especially been taking comfort in various places in the Christian tradition, especially the Desert Fathers. My second favorite saying of the Desert Fathers is from Abba Macarius, who gives us the comfort of saying, "The world is a place where they make you do stupid things." I think it is incredibly relatable, and I also think it relates to something that Jesus is up to this morning in his reaction in the moment to the disciples wanting to immediately put up a memorial of the Transfiguration.

But if we keep reading, we also get, "On the next day when they came down from the mountain, a great crowd met them. Just then, a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you, look at my son" - the man is asking for healing, I'm paraphrasing, and Jesus answers, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear you? Bring your son here."¹ Jesus exorcises the demon, but not without a very relatable amount of frustration at everything. He still does it, but what I love here is the vision of the fullness of humanity. With what I imagine is something like the Messiah-equivalent vacation in Cabo, coming down from the mountain, refreshed, moisturized, what have you, he is then met by all of the grappling crowds, and the disciples weren't able to do the healing so he has to do yet another thing, and he's so relatably frustrated with the world.

With our story this morning of the Transfiguration, we could just rest in seeing it simply as a sign of Jesus being a Son of God, simply as a sign of the full divinity of Jesus, but I actually come down on the side of the Transfiguration (especially with that second part of the story) actually being a place where Jesus is instead showing us, not that he's so special and so different, but Jesus is showing what's possible, Jesus is actually showing the fullness of humanity in the Transfiguration, and we need the other part of the story to get that full spectrum. The working title of this sermon was "The Ecstasy and the Exasperation" ... all so relatable.

Throughout human history, people have tried to make sense of what could conveniently be called a "mountaintop experience". The Desert Fathers are also making sense of the experience that they were having in prayer as they removed themselves out to the desert for "spiritual research & development" to go deeply into their life with God.

Closer to modern day, Abraham Maslow, famous for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (basic needs and you build up from there), put at the top of that pyramid "self actualization". What a lot of people don't know is that Abraham Maslow is actually a bit of a mystic, and in a different book would call them "peak experiences": those moments when there is an expansiveness that was there all along but suddenly you're

¹ Luke 9:37-41

made aware of it and left breathless. Annie Dillard, an author I probably quote too much, has a great line that gets at that: “I’ve been my whole life a bell, and never knew it, until that moment I was lifted and struck.”

I work in campus ministry, at Canterbury House at the University of Michigan. If you don’t know the history of it, it’s the oddest campus ministry: the world’s only campus ministry meets concert venue meets community center for artists and activists. It’s often a place where I do have Christians coming to say Evening Prayer or do Eucharist or Bible study, but more often than not, most I’m interacting with folks who are not going through a church door any time soon. Interestingly, one of the things we’ve done that has hooked folks the most, gotten traction and community, has been silence.

We started this program, in conversation with all the musicians who come through, called *Sound & Silence*. The name is what you get: There’s music, then silence, and then more music. It looks a little different every week. Half the time, we have a guest artist come in—so it might be one week a jazz saxophonist, another week a modular synthesizer set, another week a seven-person band. The other weeks, we have Community Nights, in which people decide among themselves what they’re going to do, like a free open improv. It’s an interesting experiment to see how different a silence can be, given what leads you into it and what brings you back out of it.

It’s also been a way, given Canterbury’s odd charisms, of getting to share some of the best parts of our tradition with people who wouldn’t be coming through the doors of a church enough to get them in the first place. Many students who I work with now, they don’t know the Creed, but honestly if they sat down with some monks I know, they would have a conversation with just as much depth of that encounter with stillness and what they’re dredging up from there. It’s fun as a priest to go, “Hey, there’s a saint that talks about that, there are Desert Fathers who talked about that, here’s a way to put it into conversation.” Sometimes, that’s the only framework I’ve got.

This one time, at a Community Night, as the last musician stopped, someone had been humming, and they kept the hum going. Then more and more people started joining the hum, and then they started playing with chords with each other, and that turned into wordless open-mouth singing, which just built into this crescendo and crested, and found its way out and back into the humming, until one person was left, and it dropped us off into the silence.

I was tearing up, and some other people were, too. I was sitting there, like, “I don’t think there’s anyone in this room that would have the context that Pentecostal services are like this, that move a group so much together.” It turned out that my intern, who’s a bit older than me, came up to me afterwards and said, “I’ve not heard singing like that since I was at a Pentecostal church in the 90s.” It was good that my sense was validated there.

It was so great for students and others who hadn’t had an experience like that to then get to talk about aspects of the spiritual life and spiritual practice, that if you keep showing up enough, sometimes you can go somewhere together; sometimes you have those moments where something that you know is there all the time gets unveiled in a different way. And more than that, you can’t confect it, you can’t make those

moments happen, you just have to keep showing up, keep setting up the conditions and showing up. You don't get told how many mountaintops Jesus and his disciples went up before finally on one of them, Jesus is suddenly shone out and the disciples can finally see truths that have been there all along.

The best lesson with continuing this practice week to week, is when a student misses a few and then comes back says, "The weeks I didn't come feel so off, that something's different. I actually need this." Pedagogically, I couldn't imagine a better lesson about the whole point of a spiritual practice, because the point of practice—the point of even the mountaintop experiences themselves, whatever the peaks might be, the point of it getting bright, the point of the sound of the bell, the point of becoming transfigure—is not about secluding ourselves in our own little communities so that we can cultivate the God-feels. If we're to shine, if we're to sound, it's so that we, too, might shine that light and sound that bell into the rest of our lives and into a world that is stuck in its fever pitch.

My favorite saying from the Desert Fathers goes, "Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' The old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like tin lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"