

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE ORDER OF THINGS”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 17: 1-9

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 15, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 17: 1-9

The Transfiguration

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The Order of Things

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

A week ago, on Wednesday, while on our mission trip to Malawi, we climbed a nearby lookout -- an absolutely picturesque mountaintop location with a large wooden cross at the top -- and from that position we could see the entire Nkhoma Mission Hospital complex, along with many of the homes that Medical Missions had either helped to build or refurbish. Before the hike, our leader, Todd Garrett, assured us that it would take about 2 hours. Well, about 2 hours into our hike we realized that Todd was a little bit off in his assessment, which probably had to do with the fact that he was a graduate of the Citadel and also a Marine; because it took the rest of us -- doctors and other non-medical types -- closer to three and a half hours to get there and back. But, again, it really was stunning!

I share that story to also mention that we had a guide with us -- three local guides, to be precise -- and having them with us was very important, not only in terms of getting a few folks back to the apartments who needed to cut out early, but also because the trail we took wasn't nearly as well-manicured as some of the trails that we might be accustomed to in some of our state parks, for example. There were multiple times where we had to take a right or a left, and sometimes the trail was well-worn, while at other times the trail

seemed hardly visible at all, and without someone who knew the way, we could have easily gotten lost -- though I'm sure Todd could have figured it out.

Thankfully, our guides set a nice, steady pace and they stopped regularly so we could catch our breath; and believe me, we needed those breaks...“a la” the extra 1.5 hours.

Now, we had a good hike and we all stayed together, but what could have made our hike even more difficult was if someone in the group had chosen to move ahead of the guide.

And we've probably all experienced something like that. It could be that there is a group leader for a project at school, or it may have been the captain of a work team at the office, but there is often that one other person who takes it upon themselves to get out front and make their own decisions -- and when that happens, it can cause the whole group to start heading in a different and sometimes altogether wrong direction. There's often at least one person like that in any group, and it's not that they're trying to cause trouble -- they're just curious, or eager, or maybe they're just confident. The problem isn't their enthusiasm; it's their position, and instead of following the leader, as that children's song would suggest, they move ahead of the leader.

And that can create problems, because they may not know that just a short distance ahead -- the path narrows, or that the footing gets tricky, or that the view they thought they might enjoy can't be seen from their vantage point.

And that's when the leader has to call them back...not necessarily to scold, but definitely to redirect: “Everyone, this way, please!”

Such is the story of our human experience, I'm afraid. God invites us to follow. We set off on our own. We get lost. God finds us and calls us back. God invites us to follow. We set off on our own -- we've seen that movie many times.

And this morning, we see it again, because at its heart, the story of Jesus' transfiguration is about movement and direction / it's about authority and trust.

To put it plainly, it is about what happens when we move ahead of the One we are meant to follow.

We need to know that the Bible regularly describes faith as a journey. Enoch walked with God. Job walked with God. The Psalms speak again and again of paths and journeys. To be certain, faith is never presented as something that is static or settled; it's lived...always unfolding...always in motion.

And we are invited to take that walk / to make that journey of faith, and not surprisingly, one of the great challenges for us is not so much that we refuse to walk with God, it's that we walk ahead of God. As if to say, “C'mon God, keep up!”

The story goes that at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–1778, the Continental Army was desperate. Supplies were scarce, morale was low, and it has been said that many of the officers pressed General George Washington to act, to launch an attack -- to make some bold move and force momentum back in their favor. But Washington did something deeply countercultural for a commander under that kind of pressure. Washington chose to wait!

One evening, a local ironmaster and landowner named Isaac Potts -- who, being a Quaker, was also a pacifist -- came upon Washington, who happened to be alone in the woods. Potts later recounted that he was effectively stopped in his tracks. George Washington was on his knees in the snow, praying out loud.

He wasn't issuing orders or drafting plans or rallying the troops, he was simply seeking God's guidance!

Potts would later say, “If there is anyone on this earth that God will listen to, it is George Washington.”

Now, why would Potts say that? Well, part of the reason was that he witnessed a man whose first impulse wasn't to act, but to be attentive / a man who had every right to command, but who instead chose to submit himself. Potts saw a man who, before putting a plan together, decided to wait...and to listen.

If we're being honest with ourselves, it's difficult to wait, and few of us are very good at it. So often, our first impulse is to act, to be first / to do something that is tangible and lasting.

As it happens, that impulse is on full display in this morning's lectionary reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain -- and that detail alone should catch our attention, because, in the Bible, mountains are places of revelation...

Sinai, Carmel, Nebo, Zion. Whenever people ascend a mountain, we can pretty well assume that something significant is about to happen.

And in this case, it did! Right before their eyes, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance changes and his clothes became dazzling white.

And who should appear but Moses and Elijah -- who represent the Law and the Prophets, the full breadth of God's saving work thus far.

This moment was undoubtedly an occasion of awe, and mystery, and holy disorientation.

The Bible tells us that the disciples were terrified, and why wouldn't they be? Now, Peter -- impulsive, earnest, well-meaning Peter -- he started talking / he started planning.

"Lord," he said, "it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Mark's Gospel tells us, almost gently, that Peter "did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke add a detail that is both humorous and revealing..."While he was still speaking..." In other words, God had to interrupt Peter in order to get a word in.

It seems that in his urgency, Peter misread God's revelation. Seeing it as a task that needed to be managed, he moved beholding...to building.

That is when the cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from within saying: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

In other words, don't build. Don't try to manage the situation. Don't try to do something impressive. Just listen!

When the cloud lifted, Moses was gone, Elijah was gone, and Jesus was standing alone -- a visible reminder of who exactly it is that's supposed to come first, and who exactly it is that's supposed to follow.

Peter -- for all his faith -- he so often wanted to lead. "Call me out on the water," he said...and Jesus did. But when Peter got distracted by the wind and the waves, he began to sink.

"I will never deny you," Peter would one day promise, yet before the cock crowed, we recall how it was that he had denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times!

When Jesus spoke of going to Jerusalem -- where he would suffer and die -- Peter pulled him aside and said, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen."

There again, Peter tried to redirect the mission / he tried to manage the future, and what Jesus said in response must have hit Peter like a hammer: "Get behind me, Satan."

We notice that Jesus didn't say, "Go away." He didn't suggest that Peter was no longer a disciple. But he did want Peter to understand whose will and whose way ultimately mattered.

In that sense, the Transfiguration was about order and position. It's about putting first things first and prioritizing Jesus as the one who sets the direction.

I dare say that we may be tempted to distance ourselves from Peter and assume that his struggle could never be ours, but I suspect that we are more like Peter than we may care to admit.

We live in a culture that prizes initiative and decisiveness / we admire bold leadership, and quick solutions. Here again, we don't like to wait.

Even in the life of the church, we want outcomes. We want reassurance...and when what we get is uncertainty, or fear, or mystery, rarely is our first to listen. No! Far too often, we rush to act; we fill the silence with our words...we build what we think will last!

In so many ways, that is what happened in this morning's Old Testament Lesson. Moses was called to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive God's law, and forty days pass...40 long days -- and the people grow restless.

On account of a cloud that covered the mountain, God felt absent to the people below. They couldn't hear God, nor could they see God, and so they decided to make something they could see. They fashioned a golden calf, of all things! When they did that, not only did it make God angry, but it broke God's heart, because the children he loved chose to deal with God's perceived absence by turning to idols...and instead of waiting and listening and trusting, they took matters into their own hands.

That sounds an awful lot like us, doesn't it. I mean, how often do we too fill the silence with noise? How often do we rush to replace waiting with activity? How often do we too try to manage God's grace, confusing faithfulness with productivity?

We often rush headlong to do something / anything, when what God really wants from us...is to listen!

Today we are grateful to welcome to worship members of the Washington Light Infantry, several of whom join us this morning with their wives.

Military units, like the Washington Light Infantry, do not invent their mission as they go. They receive and train under it -- and then they carry it out. They submit their personal impulse to a higher authority which guides them and gives them direction and purpose.

In his work, *Politics*, Aristotle argued that a person is fit to command only after they learn how to obey. Over time, that idea has been condensed into a phrase that captures well that ancient truth about leadership.

And if we were to go to the Washington Light Infantry armory right now and looked above the stage we would see writ large those words: "Obedience alone gives the right to command."

Even our nation's history reflects that truth. As this year marks the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we rightly give thanks for the courage, conviction, and sacrifice of those who sought liberty and justice and who pledged to one another "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor."

I wonder if we ever think deeply enough about those words, "Sacred honor"? I suppose some might take them to mean that the signers were affirming a measure of personal pride, or that they reflect a kind of patriotic rhetoric. But that's not the case at all. What the signers were saying was that they were willing to stake their lives on the truth of the cause that they believed had been given to them by God.

Consider how the Declaration of Independence begins not with human ambition, but with an appeal to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God,"

Too often we forget that our founders understood, and, in fact, believed, that our rights are not grounded in the legitimacy of our government -- they have been given to us by God!

That, dear friends, is a history is worth cherishing, because faith -- like freedom -- is a gift from God, and to understand that gift we must look beyond ourselves and beyond what we think is best.

John Calvin once said that "the sum total of the Christian life is the denial of oneself." Now, that doesn't mean that we are called to neglect ourselves. It means that we are called to order ourselves -- our hearts and minds / our words and deeds -- that they would become subordinate to God's will and God's way...that we would trust what God says...nothing needs to be added!

And what God says here in Matthew 17 is -- "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

When we do listen to Jesus, and when we are shaped not by impulse, but by trust and obedience...what we will find is that acquaintances become neighbors, meetings become ministries, committees become communities, and an infantry becomes a family.

Ah, when we listen to Jesus / when we strive to develop something of the heart and mind of Christ...what we will discover that life is not about what we can accomplish, it's about what God can accomplish!

At the end of the day, the story of the Transfiguration is a story about God. It is a story about revealing God's Son and reordering our lives. It is one of the many ways by which God reminds us that our calling is not to rush ahead of God, but to get behind Him / to follow...to listen.

The more we do that / the more we learn to listen...the more we begin to understand that following Jesus is by no means a loss of direction...he is the direction, and God's direction alone will lead us to life and life abundant!

Jesus put it this way, "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Perhaps we could think of life as a trial that leads to the top of a mountain, and there are any number of zigs and zags and pitfalls to avoid...and we really do need a guide to help us get there.

In John 14:26, Jesus tells us that "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Indeed, part of the blessed role and function of the Holy Spirit is to be for us...that guide / the very One who can help get ourselves out of the way...and point us to the saving work of Jesus that was accomplished on another large wooden cross -- and to help us know, not only how to get there, but how get to the empty tomb...and, from there -- how to live. Friends, this is the very truth of the Gospel, that following Jesus is not a loss of direction -- He is the direction!

He is the way and the truth and life from this time on and forevermore. Praise be to God! Amen!