

“The other nine”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 9:28-43, 46-48

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

We know this story. We know the mountaintop, the bright light, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the voice from heaven. We know how Jesus goes up that mountain and is changed before the very eyes of Peter, James, and John. We know this story. We tell it every year. But there’s someone we never talk about: the other nine disciples, the ones Jesus leaves behind, the ones *not* invited up the mountain.

We know they’re there; we’re told so several verses earlier. Are we really to think that they are just cool with it? “OK, Jesus, we’ll see you later! You go off with your special disciples, and we’ll just hang out here—you know, just the non-special disciples, the regular disciples. You know, you didn’t tell us anything, didn’t give us any instructions; we don’t know how long you’ll be gone, but that’s fine. We’ll just wait here.”

I picture these nine disciples, standing there at the base of the mountain, the sun glaring down on them, as they watch the backs of Jesus, Peter, James, and John recede up the mountain, growing more and more distant, till they are just dots. It’s not the first time it’s happened. Peter, James, and John were the only ones who witnessed Jesus raise a girl from death to life. They’ll be the only ones invited to be with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. (They’re also the only ones Jesus gives nicknames.)

These disciples left everything, their families, their livelihoods, to follow Jesus. Matthew, the tax collector, who threw a great feast for Jesus. Philip who recruited other disciples, saying the famous line, “Come and see.” Thomas, who gets such a bad rap for doubting but really just wanted to experience the resurrection. Simon who was zealous, maybe for revolution or the Law or Jesus, or all three. Judas who, before his betrayal, was so trusted that he’s their treasurer. Jude, and James son of Alphaeus, and Bartholomew, and Peter’s own brother, Andrew—the one who got Peter to follow Jesus in the first place, and yet he’s the one always mentioned second or sometimes just called, “Peter’s brother.” Peter’s never called “Andrew’s brother.”

Jesus has filled them with a hope they’ve never known before, a love they have wanted all their lives. And now, he’s left them. They feel lost, angry, scared. They whisper, “What do they have that we don’t? Why not us? Why weren’t we good enough?”

They wanted to hear the voice of God. They wanted to see Jesus transform. Why not them?

We feel that way sometimes, don’t we? Oh sure, many of us have stood on that mountain and experienced the sweeping presence of God; we have felt the certainty of a call to discipleship; we have sung and danced in joy. But God never leaves us on that mountaintop, does she? We come down, and sometimes we’re down for a very long time. We look for God, and we can see God in

other people's lives, other people getting invited up the mountain, other people so confident in their faith, whose lives seem to march on without tragedy or doubt—but we look, and God's not there for us. We feel left behind. Like God piled us together in gym class and picked a team for dodgeball, and we weren't on it.

It's easy to believe on the mountain; it's a lot harder to believe down here in the valley.

And it's here in the valley, while Jesus is gone, that the other nine are approached by a father who is desperate to save his dying son. He begs them. But they can't, or won't.

Maybe they are too busy being jealous and arguing who's the greatest. We know they'll be arguing about that soon enough. Or maybe they're so consumed with their own hurt that they can't help or care about anyone else. Or maybe they just lose their confidence. They don't think they can do it.

Again, I suspect that's not an entirely foreign feeling for us. We've probably felt at times like the power has gone out of us. We feel burnt out, not good enough. Our wounds, instead of opening us to others, shut us off. We isolate. We may struggle with feelings of resentment or anger. We get stuck, because we think God's gone.

I wonder, though, if the other nine misread the situation. They think they were left behind because Jesus doesn't love them as much. But Jesus doesn't say that. The text doesn't say that. In fact, these three whom Jesus chooses—Peter, James, and John—they're not exactly the best of the best. Luke tells us that they almost missed the whole show; they were sleeping! Snoozing! And when they do wake up and see the miracle, Peter has no clue what's going on; he proposes that they all get hotel rooms. For ghosts! These are the same guys who will fall asleep while Jesus prays in Gethsemane. (They apparently had a sleeping problem.) These are the guys who will want to call down fire from heaven to destroy a town just because it rejected them—despite everything Jesus has said about love and forgiveness. Peter will even deny Jesus, three times.

Maybe, those three are like the struggling students who get more of the teacher's attention in class. Or maybe, Jesus needed to leave some disciples behind. Maybe he left them there for a purpose. Maybe he left them there so they could meet a grieving father and save his dying son.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them "power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases." He told them that they had the power to help that father and son.

Maybe they were so focused on looking up that mountain, wondering why they weren't chosen, that they never stopped to think that they were exactly where they were supposed to be, down here, in the valley, with a dad and his scared little boy. They were in the midst of another transfiguration—the loving and healing of this child—but they were so upset, so convinced of their unworthiness, that they missed it.

There will come a day—and Jesus knows this—when Jesus will leave all of them. He will die. They will all—even Peter, James, and John—be left staring up at that mountain of heaven,

wondering why he left them. Jesus needs to prepare them, to help them learn that he can be physically absent but spiritually present. He needs them to discover the power and love that lie within them, even and especially when they feel broken.

What if the valleys in our lives aren't signs that we've failed or that God doesn't want us? What if the valleys are actually where we need to be, because that's where we discover what power God has placed within us to behold, and love, and heal all of God's other hurting people, who are also down here in this valley?

What if what we interpret as God's neglect is actually an invitation?

In his book *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen reflects on Jesus' statement to his disciples before he dies: "It is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you... But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth" (John 16:7, 13). Nouwen writes, "The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming, but also by his leaving."

I think Jesus gave the other nine a gift that day, though it was a gift they were not ready to receive. He gave them the gift of absence. Absence creates space. Space to grow and stretch and become what we never could when we were comfortable and contained in the nice box of God's definable presence. Space to grieve honestly, to question and doubt, as well as to imagine and create. Space for life to slip back in, with laughter. Space to relinquish all pretense at understanding and to stand silently, without explanation, before suffering. Space to open our eyes, as if for the first time, to the searing pain of others—and to see something miraculous take place: love.

The other nine thought Jesus had abandoned them, not knowing that he had chosen them. The absence of Jesus, of God, there at the foot of that mountain, was an invitation to perceive the presence of Jesus, of God, in a new, and more intimate, and more radical way: to perceive God in themselves, and in the people around them, like that father and his dying son.

I wonder: What is God giving you in the valley, in the absence? What power might God be unfolding within you? What person might God be bringing to you, for healing? And will you notice? Will you behold the transfiguration that takes place right here in the mud of human pain and grace, or will you miss it because you were looking up, at the mountain, wishing you were there?

You are exactly where you are needed. And so is God. **Amen.**