

SERMON: Up, Down, and Through

TEXT: Mark 9:2-9

Her given name was Araminta Ross. Her family called her Minty for short. As an adult she took her mother's name, Harriet. Many who had never even met her nicknamed her Moses.

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery on a plantation in Maryland around 1820. According to an article on www.history.com, "Harriet had eight brothers and sisters, but the realities of slavery eventually forced many of them apart, despite [their mother's] attempts to keep the family together. When Harriet was five years old, she was rented out as a nursemaid where she was whipped when the baby cried, leaving her with permanent emotional and physical scars."

At the age of 12, she was hit in the head with a heavy object while protecting another slave. Her skull was broken, and she suffered the rest of her life with headaches, seizures, narcolepsy, and vivid dreams which she interpreted as visions from God.

Along with her mother and siblings, Harriet was to be freed upon the death of her owner, as directed in his will. But the owner's next of kin refused to honor

the will, keeping Harriet and her family in bondage. When they learned that two of her brothers were about to be sold, Harriet came up with a plan to escape.

The three of them escaped during the night of September 17, 1849. Her two brothers then changed their minds and went back. Harriet forged ahead, traveling 90 miles on foot to Pennsylvania where she was finally free.

That was the first of numerous trips she made along the Underground Railroad back to Maryland to rescue members of her family and others. Harriet Tubman personally led at least 70 - possibly hundreds - of slaves to freedom. Later trips took them all the way to Canada when freedom was no longer guaranteed in the northern states. This was due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed fugitive and freed workers in the north to be captured and enslaved once again.

Harriet summarized her time as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, saying, "I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

I wonder if Harriet would have characterized her initial arrival into freedom in Pennsylvania as a mountaintop experience. Being able to breathe easy and sleep soundly for the first time in her life. Not having to hide. Not having to fear that she

would be beaten for crossing the street. Of course, she wasn't completely free, as she was still surrounded by racism and oppression and injustice. But it is astounding to me that after risking her life to find freedom, she would come down from that mountain to risk it over and over and over again to bring others to freedom as well.

You may have never even seen a mountain before, but I think we have all had a mountaintop experience. That moment full of beauty and wonder that took your breath away. That *thin place* where God seemed as close as your fingertips and your spirit was filled with peace. That event when everything was perfect, everyone was there, and you wanted it to last forever. That time of clarity and purpose when you realized you were right where you belonged.

The mountaintop experience for Peter, James, and John, was certainly a breathtaking and wondrous event. And Peter wanted to make it last by building dwellings for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. But neither peace nor clarity would describe the overarching feeling for the disciples. They were truly terrified to see Jesus change right before their eyes. The dazzling brightness of his clothes and the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah elicited real fear in them - not in the sense

of awe, but in the sense of danger. They didn't know what to think. They didn't know what to say.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from it a voice spoke to them: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" The scene is similar to the moment of Jesus' baptism, when a voice from heaven spoke to Jesus only, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

One scholar wrote, "The Transfiguration gives the disciples the experience of witnessing a most amazing and unspeakable vision that draws them to want to stay there, dwell in that place of wonder, and then to be told by the voice of the divine that their job is not to abide in that wonder but to go back down the mountain. The voice in the cloud is directed at the disciples, to the church, rather than to the Son as it was at his baptism. It speaks to Jesus' identity so that the church can see what Jesus alone heard when he was baptized." (Melinda Quivik, www.workingpreacher.org, February 14, 2021)

Up on that mountain, the divinity - the divine nature - of Jesus is revealed to Peter, James, and John. They have been in the holy presence of God. They have seen with their own eyes the connection of Jesus to Moses - representing the law of

Israel - and to Elijah - representing the prophets of Israel. They have heard the heavenly voice identifying Jesus as God's Son. And they have been given a divine commandment: "Listen to him."

Jesus instructs them not to speak of this event "until after the Son of Man [has] risen from the dead." I honestly don't think Jesus needed to say this out loud. It seems like one of those things that they might not want to talk about anyway. How would they explain it? Who would believe them? And it all happened so fast. The further away they got from it, the more they may have wondered whether it happened at all.

Once down the mountain, life returns to normal, with one major exception. The voice of God has commanded them to listen to Jesus. Listen. Not just with their ears but with their minds and their hearts, with their actions and their words. It's not as easy as it sounds.

In the chapters following the Transfiguration story in Mark, listen to what Jesus teaches: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." He will bless little children and say that the kingdom of God belongs to them. He will tell a rich man

to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. He will encourage humility, prayer, forgiveness, and generosity. He will name the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And he will add a second, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

After experiencing the mountaintop, Harriet Tubman came down and truly listened to Jesus with her whole life. Though the odds were great that she survived that first trip through the wilderness to freedom, she dared to risk it again and again and again to rescue others.

If we are to go UP the mountain with Jesus, we must be willing to see and discover and learn new things. Things that may reveal Jesus in a new way. Things that may frighten us and confuse us. Things that will challenge us and change us.

If we are to go DOWN the mountain with Jesus, we must be willing to listen to him. We must be willing to follow wherever he leads and to minister among the poor and downtrodden.

Following Transfiguration Sunday, we begin the season of Lent. Starting on Ash Wednesday, we must decide whether we are willing to go THROUGH the suffering with Jesus. Through the rejection, as the crowd who once praised him turns against him. Through the betrayal of a close friend, the denial of another, and the weakness of the rest who can't even pray with him. Through the trial and the accusations that he is not who he claims to be. Through the pain and humiliation of being whipped and stripped. Through the calls for his crucifixion, the agony of the cross, and the silence of death. Through the confusion of the empty tomb and the dazzling brightness of resurrection.

May we be willing to follow Jesus UP, DOWN, AND THROUGH... to the glory of God!

AMEN.