

Called to Go Downhill

February 26, 2017

Matthew 17:1-9

Winston Churchill was once asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?" "It's quite flattering," replied Sir Winston. "But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."

It's great to go up the mountain to celebrate. We need high points to keep us going and move us along. But that's not the end of the journey. That's not a reason to pitch our tents and keep our heads in the clouds. It's good to get affirmation, a booster shot, on the mountaintop. But there's work still to be done down the hill. For example, a few verses later in Matthew's gospel, a man kneels in front of Jesus and pleads for healing for his little boy. There's work still to be done down the hill.

What's the Good News in our readings today? Our God comes down. This is the core of the Gospel. Our God comes down. That means there is more work to be done. **We are called to go downhill.**

We love sporting events because they are so simple. You win or lose. Then you go home. But as nervous Cubs fans know, there's always next season. For one hundred and eight years, that was a cry of defiant hope. Now for fans of the defending World Series champs, that's a terrifying statement. Pitchers and catchers have already reported for Spring Training. It's time to go back to work!

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Of course, we Christians have an advantage. This time with Jesus on the mountaintop previews how it will all turn out in the end. We have the best of reasons to go downhill and get to work. Even in the deepest valley, we never work alone. Jesus goes ahead of us into the darkness to bring his light. The Holy Spirit fills us with the joyful energy we need to do the work. And what we do down the hill in Jesus' name will be carried to the top in the end.

Our God comes down. On Transfiguration Sunday, we take a moment to glimpse the glory to come. That's one reason we have our Mardi Gras celebration today. It's important to have some fun, to celebrate the joy, to be the people of God with smiles on our faces. We'll need some of that joy to carry us down the hill during Lent. After all, it's hard work to confront ourselves, our brokenness, our sin. But that's part of the hard work.

Our God comes down. So our proper work is down the hills of this world—alongside the least, the lost, and the lonely. That's why churches are at the center of efforts to welcome and resettle refugees who flee from persecution, violence and despair. We do that because we have been resettled in the kingdom of God's light in Christ.

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Our God comes down. That's why we must be critical of Christian efforts to stay on the mountain. There is no such thing as a prosperity gospel. We must be critical of those Christians who promise wealth as a payoff for piety. We must be critical of those Christians who build crystal palaces while our neighbors live under bridges. We must be critical of those Christians who align themselves with power rather than speaking truth to power. We must be critical of those Christians who promise a home beyond the clouds while millions long for a home right here on the ground.

Any church that builds mansions in the clouds does not follow Jesus down the hill. "*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths,*" we read in Second Peter, chapter one, verse sixteen, "*when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.*" That majesty is displayed on the cross.

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Let's be clear about one thing. Our call to go downhill is not the same as becoming downtrodden. For example, today is "Bold Women Sunday" in the ELCA. Women in our culture have often been told that in order to serve they have to be quiet. Women in our culture have often been told that in order to serve they must defer to men. Women in our culture have often been told that no matter what they say, some man has to ratify it by some degree of "man-splaining."

That is not part of the gospel message. Women were the first witnesses to the Resurrection. Women were equal partners with the Apostle Paul. Martin Luther regarded Katie as his equal, his partner and his business manager. In a time in this culture when the role, status and safety of women are under attack, we who follow Jesus will not tolerate such treatment. Instead, we celebrate the bold, creative and joyful leadership of women in our congregation, our community, our synod and our denomination.

Today I want to honor one bold Lutheran woman in particular. The Reverend Doctor Norma Everist came to Wartburg Theological Seminary when I was a second-year student. I became her teaching assistant and typed galleys for one of her books. Norma was then and is now a powerful voice for the gospel, for God's justice, for patient compassion, and for hope. In spite of a chronic autoimmune disorder, Norma taught and wrote, lectured and loved, mothered and modeled the faith with boldness. Norma is heading into a new chapter of life as she leaves Wartburg. But she continues to inspire me with her faith and work.

We are called to go downhill. Let's join Jesus there and get to work. Let's pray...

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