“Set up Shop”

Mark 9:2-9

February 11,2018

Have you ever had something happen that was so inexplicable, you could not describe it. All of you who are parents in here probably felt it the first time you held your child. When I got to hold Scarlet and Lacey for the first time it was totally inexplicable. Part of it was amazement that there was now I child that I am responsible for and love very much. Part of it was what am I getting into? Then five seconds later they were whisked away to the NICU. A friend of mine had a similar experience the first time he held his daughter. He was alone in the nursery with her and she was the only baby in there. Alone with her in that silence, he sung her every single song that he could think of. Faced with the mystery of that moment, he began to sing.

One situation in my life that has always been inexplicable was a near car accident. I was driving home for thanksgiving my sophomore year of college. A friend of ours asked me to pick up a garage door from a guy, that he bought on craigslist. My first car was a 1994 Ford Ranger with a purple stripe. We called it the Danger Ranger. So heading home with the garage door haphazardly tied up in the bed, I hit this patch of black ice. I was in the right lane of a four-lane highway. I start to go across the eastbound lanes of traffic, across the median and into the other lanes. Somehow the truck kept going, then I ended up in the exit ramp on the other side of the highway. I don’t know if I have ever been as bewildered over an event such as that. Making sure that I was okay and alive, I get out of the truck. The garage door parts were all over the ditch. I picked them up, secured everything and went on my way. I had no idea what I was going to tell people about this event. Or how Bob’s garage door was probably dented up beyond repair. It will always be something I will look back on with amazement. Thinking what in the heck just happened. Eventually I realized that there were some parts missing. So when heading back to MN a few days later, the side rail was still in the ditch.

Think about moments for a second. Sometimes they seem to last forever and sometimes they go by like that. Today we don’t have a solid definition of a moment. Apparently up until the mid 1800s there was an exact definition of a moment. It was 1/40th of an hour or about 90 seconds. But now it is slippery and could be seconds, minutes or hours. Time is hard to define. The National Institute of Standards and Technology tries to define time for all of us. Since 1967 we have used their clocks to define the length of a second. The length of a second is 9,192,631,770 cycles of radiation from the vibration of a cesium atom between two states. It works well and is consistent. But the earth that we live on is not, our days are not exactly 24 hours. When dinosaurs were around, the rotation of the earth took 23 hours. 200 million years from now, it is projected to be 25 hours. Talk about wrestling timing. The timing of feeling something and doing something is instantaneous. We are basically living on timed delay. Very short of course. So our perception of time is inexplicable and situational. Think of being in a waiting room. Seems to take forever. I think of my 9th grade geometry class. Looking at the clock, still 30 minutes left. She is talking about how to prove that two parallel lines are actually parallel. Teacher, who cares, everyone can see they are parallel. And it seems like it will never end. But some days like the birth of our children, our graduations, vacations seem to go by in the blink of an eye. Such is time

And such is our story today. One of my favorite stories. As with much of scripture we want to explain it away. Rationalize it, tame it. Much of the time we need to sit in the mystery of the story. That is what I hope we can do today. Six days later, the story beings. Six days from what? Six days after Peter admits that Jesus is the Messiah. Then he argues with Jesus over the way he was going to die. More on that next Sunday. So six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up to a mountain top. No commentary on why they were going or what they were going to do. The three disciples must have been pleading with Jesus to tell them why they were heading up this mountain. Or maybe There Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them. Not even Tide, that we heard about so much during the super bowl could get them that white. Then appeared to them was Elijah and Moses. And they were talking with Jesus. What it would have been like to overhear that conversation. This is like God’s all star team. If you are a packer fan like I am, this would be like seeing Bart Starr, Brett Favre and Aaron Rodgers talking to each other. But this is way more important than those great quarterbacks. This is the all star team, but all star servants. So why are Moses and Elijah there anyway? One interpretation might mean that Jesus has come to be elevated over the work of Moses and Elijah. Another that I find better is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the work of Moses and Elijah. Moses we know did die and never reached the promise land. But it never says where he was buried. So perhaps he did not actually die. In our old testament lesson we hear of Elijah and Elisha. Confusing enough with the names. The Lord was going to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. They head to Bethel. Elijah says to Elisha, Stay Here for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel. Elisha responds, As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. Some prophets in Bethel came to Elisha and said “do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” Elisha responds, “Yes, I know; keep silent.” This scene plays out twice more as they go to Jericho and as they go to the Jordan. Walking some twenty miles in one day, very impressive. Elijah eventually takes of his mantle, and strikes the water. Reminiscent of the parting of the red sea by Moses, they walk across the Jordan on dry ground. He pleades with Eljiah for a double portion of his spirit. As they are walking and talking, a chariot of fire separates the two men. Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind. In despair, Elisha cries out, and tears his clothes in two. He has just lost his leader and has no idea of what to do. Elijah lives on in the mind of the Israelites. He never died.

The disciples know this when they see Moses and Elijah with Jesus. Did they immediately recognize them? Was this the REAL Moses and Elijah? Whenever it sets in for Peter, he goes into fixer mode. Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Recognizing the enormity of the situation, he gets to work. You could imagine him trying to get some wood, soft materials for a bed and trying his best to give them shelter. He was trying to set up shop for his and Israels heroes. If he had a camera he would try to take some pictures and savor the moment. Maybe like that young boy at the super bowl, he would pull out his phone not exactly knowing what to do. This is so ridiculous. What am I supposed to do? Our inclination is always to DO something. We want to contribute something of value. If not we may feel like a failure. But God had a different plan.

A cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud came a voice, This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him! The disciples cowered in fear. Imagine hearing the voice of God. God only has two speeches in the gospel of Mark. He says basically the same thing, at Jesus’ baptism and at this scene on the mountaintop. We should notice the importance here. This is basically a misplaced resurrection account. Foreshadowing to the cross and to the second coming. A summit of all the great leaders of Israel. And a demonstration with the dazzling white Jesus Christ, showing his true identity to the disciples. The disciples hear these Words of God and are in terror. This whole situation is completely inexplicable. Can’t we just set up shop with our heroes? Instead after they hear the voice of God, they disappear. Just Jesus is left. And they have to come down the mountain. When coming down the mountain they needed to listen to Jesus. Tell no one about this.

Tell no one about this? Are you kidding? When we go through the inexplicable like the birth of a child or a near accident, we want to tell everyone. We want to tell our families and friends to try and make some sense of the situation. Maybe Jesus told them to be quiet because no one would believe them. Edwin Muir wrote a great poem about the disciples view of the whole situation. Was it a vision? Or did we see that day the unseeable? Was the change in us alone, and the enormous earth still left forlorn, an exile or a prisoner? It asks the question we are all thinking. What are we supposed to make of all this? That is why we need to life in this mystery.

We have a propensity to set up shop. We want to stay with the great moments forever. We want to relieve our wedding days. The day of our children’s birth. I would give anything to go back and play college football again. Have that feeling of dressing in pads, putting my cleats on and running out the tunnel. Have that feeling of making a great block once again. But life keeps moving forward. Peter, James and John want to revel in the experience and set up shop. But they need to come off that mountain. Just as we all must do. Back into the ordinary life. The gospels are full of people trying to make Jesus set up shop and stay awhile. But his mission is to go out to the people, not the people come out to him.

So will we follow likewise? Will we come off that mountain? We are in a pivotal moment of the church year. Heading from ordinary time into Lent. We face a wilderness without markers that is fraught with potential danger. Do we let fear trump our faith? Do we panic and begin to worship different idols with instant gratification? The Transfiguration is a signal of God’s abundant presence in our lives. Jesus was standing on a mountaintop but realized that he still needed to go into the world. Jesus knew what fate lied ahead of him but he still went anyway. Will we follow? Jesus affirmed again after the mountain that he would be resurrected. Could the disciples possible believe that? Can we as well? The Transfiguration is a moment where the disciples truly witnessed who Jesus was. They found out that they needed to come down. They realized that this road would mark the end of Jesus’ life, but could they believe that he would come back from death?

Often as churches we like to set up shop. We build big buildings that set empty a lot of the week. We have one big hour during the week where we worship. What about the rest of the week? We keep trying to get people to come to us. But like Jesus, we should go to the people. That is not easy. I feel that pressure a lot. It is so much easier to sit in my office and read or prepare for worship. We are supposed to be out in the community. Often I have no idea what that means and I will always be trying to figure that out. Lent might be a good training ground for that fear. Lent follows Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem and down a winding and scary road. Jesus confronts the cross and is not stuck there. He is able to move past it. So what is in our way? Our fears? Our comfort? Our lack of knowledge?

As we come to eat from the table today, that can help us with a little bit of the problem. We come at least monthly to sample from this mysterious feast. We may not always want to. May not feel worthy. May not feel particularly faithful that day. But we do it anyway. We may not always know what it means. You may have one opinion on what it means and the person sitting next to you has a different idea. But you do it anyway. Because the mystery of this feast is so enticing. We want a little piece of God’s grace.

That’s what the disciples found on that mountaintop. A little piece of God’s grace. But they wanted more. They wanted Jesus to live and not to die as he has described. There is no way that the Son of God should undergo such a horrible execution. But it happens anyway. That is what is so strange about our faith. We don’t always understand it. We don’t always believe it. But we do it anyway. Can we live in that mystery? Can we go off the mountaintop and let others know what this is? Can we have the courage? I believe we can. Amen.