

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Rev. Edward A. Bellis, IV

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Dazzled by the Grace of God

Matthew 17:1-9

Let me tell you about Larry Walters the truck driver. Larry is an ordinary guy who experienced an extraordinary event. After long hauls Larry would come home and sit in lawn chair and wish he could fly. He dreamed of flying, but he never seemed to have the time, money, or the opportunity to be a pilot. So Larry spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his lawn chair staring at the heavens and dream of what it would be like to soar into the heavens.

One day Larry hooked forty-five helium filled weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He cut the ropes tying him down and he lifted off in his chair expecting to climb to a couple hundred feet over his neighborhood. Instead, Larry shot up to fifteen thousand feet and right through the approach corridor to the LA International Airport.

When he finally came down the media swarmed around him asking him why he did it? Larry said, "Well, you cannot always sit (in your lawn chair)." When asked if he was scared and Larry's face beamed, "Wonderfully so!" (Robert Fulghum, *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, pg. 139)

Larry dared to dream! His daydreams evolved into a glorious, soaring reality, and life for Larry was never the same. Because of his lawn chair lift-off into the heavens, Larry the ordinary was turned extraordinary and his flights of fancy gave way to fanciful flight!

For many of us summer is the chance where the ordinary and the extraordinary collide. Scripture speaks of such a time. The Old Testament points to moments where people encountered in a specific place where heaven and earth for a moment kiss. Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching into heaven with myriads of angels moving up and down its rungs. Jacob built an altar to remember the experience. Moses walks onto the mountain and is enveloped by the glory of God on Mount Sinai. Moses' face beamed from the mountaintop encounter. Yet, the experience is different for Peter, James, and John. This portal into heaven isn't a place; rather it is a person. Jesus is transfigured before them. The three disciples would never be the same – not after what they experienced. Each of them was "dazzled by the grace" of God! So much so that they wanted to build a monument for the experience, but Jesus encourages them to return to the valley of human need.

On this particular Sunday we celebrate the return to our normal routines of school, jobs, and church. Rally Day points us back to the valley of human need as we seek to minister in the name of Jesus Christ. We mark this moment of ministry as we commission our teachers and leaders in education. Yet, Rally Day is more than an educational moment. In this service, for us to ask the important question as individuals and as church, "If we are the body of Christ and individually member of it, what is our portal where heaven and earth kiss through us?"

We celebrate an experience of God in our worship. A new child of God is celebrated as we baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our choir leads us in the gift of song as

we sing hymns of praise and worship to God. Our Stephens' Ministry equips our lay leaders in the important call to visit and care for the sick in our midst. Our Stewardship Teams are engaging us with opening our minds to an endowment for caring a vision and ministry forward when times are troubled. Our Mission Team enables us to provide shelter through our Habitat for Humanity Teams. Rally day is our call as a congregation to descend into the valley of human need and be Christ's presence.

Remember Jesus' transfiguration brings hope for Peter, James, and John. A Presence comes and overshadows them and speaks the healing words of hope saying: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Yet just as quick as it began it was over; the Voice is still; the cloud lifts; and there is Jesus standing alone there on the mountain. This moment of mystery is profound because the curtain for the three and for us was pulled back a little; the concealed was revealed; that Jesus truly is the Son of God! There, on the Mount, Jesus' role as the Messiah is validated and we are to share that good news with the world. In Jesus we are not relegated to a place. Our meaning is found in the person and we see with full clarity that Jesus is God's beloved whose destiny ran from the mountaintop to beyond the grave.

In this world, the media is increasing reporting negative media. For instance, we see this summer's angry local mobs concerning healthcare shouting at the President in the Halls of Congress. Daily we are fed a diet of fear of the Swine Flu. The hijacking of an airplane perplexes us. We fear the rise of unemployment and foreclosure rate. As a church we fear of the declining membership in the mainline denomination. The conflict in Afghanistan leaves us questioning if we can indeed win a war or have we recreated Viet Nam. When we listen to these messages we become timid and fearful listening and hearing God's dreams.

Our text reminds us Jesus is God's beloved Son and we need only listen to him. We are to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to hear his words of hope in the face of despair. For our life and our allegiance to Jesus' message of good news is a powerful message of hope. Jesus came to give freedom to the captive and hope to the poor. When we follow him into the valley of human need and trust in him, we are a people of hope because he is God's Son and the seed of promise rests in our relationship with him. We want to stay on the mountain, but there is work to be done.

Frederick Buechner tells this story: "My family and I spend our summers in a house near the top of a small mountain in Vermont. We were sitting out on the terrace there one late afternoon with a couple who had come to spend the weekend with us, when at a certain point the wife looked out on the hills turning lavender the way they are apt to toward evening, and at the old horses swishing their tails around to keep off the flies, and then without warning (she) said, 'There's just one thing I don't understand. Why on earth do you leave this place?'" Buechner readily admits that he didn't answer the woman's question: "I just made some kind of polite, vague noise." But several pages later he reflects: "Why on earth do you ever leave this place? ... Well I leave it in hope of becoming a human being." (The Magnificent Defeat, pgs. 116-118)

As our program year begins, we are all called and we are chosen to share that hope of becoming a human being by becoming Christ's servant in the world using our various and different gifts to serve others! We, who have been dazzled by God's grace, are the gracious and life giving hope to all others we contact. We have been to the mountaintop. Today we are reminded to descend confidently down into the valley of the living and serve those in need by offering the love and hope of Christ.