

***“Yes, what goes up must come down,  
and when we’re down we must look up”***

Final sermon in nine-week “Yes, And...” series: Passion + Humility  
*Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.*

Luke 9:28-36, 37-43a (NRSV)

Today I want to talk about the “highs and lows” of life...the peaks and the valleys. We all have them...and it seems the more life that we live, the more these highs and lows become relative to one another. And what once was the lowest low, may not be as low anymore compared to something else that happened to us. You might remember as a teenager going through your first break-up and you thought the whole world was ending. But as life goes on and you live a bit more – you discover that the world doesn’t end when you break up someone. Or maybe what you thought was the highest high like graduating from college or getting a job promotion no longer is your highest high when you have a child and realize that is a love like you’ve never known before.

Or maybe something that is a low, like a relationship break-up or divorce, can end up being a high if you realize that parts of you had kind of died in that relationship and now that you

are out of it – you are discovering things about yourself that you love. Or maybe the low of not getting a job you want or into your first choice school becomes a high when a few months down the line you get a job that changes the whole trajectory of your life.

Overall, I think we’re better off when we don’t compare our highs and lows to one another...and we just allow ourselves to experience them. Because that’s life...it’s always an ebb and flow. And actually, as we live, we come to realize just how much we need both the highs and lows to be an even-keeled person. It’s kind of ironic, but true!

What’s also true is that the highs of life are better lived together and the lows of life are only endured together.

This is certainly evident in today’s text. On this very literal mountaintop – Jesus is not alone. Given that we know

from Luke 9 that just days before Jesus was contemplating his death and trying to explain it to his disciples, it's not far fetched to think that he might have been feeling pretty low. It's right before today's passage when we hear Jesus describe how he will die to his disciples and then he offers this intense invitation: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."* (Luke 9:23-24).

That's tough stuff. Heavy stuff. Confusing stuff. It's clear that Jesus is feeling the weight of his impending death and the weight of ensuring that his disciples understand what is required of them as well...you know...that his whole presence on earth is not just about *him*, in fact it's primarily about *them*!

So Jesus is feeling the weight of all of this. And when we're down...it's always good to remember to look up. And I think that's what Jesus is doing when he heads up the mountain. Remember that in the Bible, mountaintops are pretty much synonymous with "Encounter with God."

Probably the most well known encounter like this in the Old Testament is Moses on Mt. Sinai...he receives the 10 Commandments – that which becomes the foundation of the covenant of God with God's people. It is a mysterious moment – Moses does not see the face of God but we read in Exodus 34 that, *"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him,"* (Exodus 34:29-30).

Moses wasn't even sure of what he had experienced – but his face revealed that something extraordinary had happened. Oftentimes that's how highs are right? We can't quite put them into words...but we just can't stop smiling or maybe even as we walk through our day we kind of feel like we're floating on whatever good news or good feeling we have. It feels like we can handle anything because of that high. But of course, it eventually fades.

In any case, Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, and I think he knew that he wanted to encounter God. And he did. Kind of. What he encountered were two figures that were symbolic of the faithfulness of God throughout the past, Moses and Elijah...representatives of the law and the prophets...that which Jesus had come to earth to fulfill. One of my favorite parts of this text is that Moses and Elijah and Jesus are all talking – and we’re told that they are talking about Jesus’ departure. These guys are here for Jesus as listening ears and as two people who can understand what he is thinking about and going through – whereas his disciples don’t understand...they can’t understand.

This whole thing reminds me of something from the ABC reality show *The Bachelor*. Anybody else indulge in that mindless TV show? At some point in the season the host Chris Harrison always brings on a former bachelor to encourage the current bachelor because, of course, no one else on earth can relate to what he’s going through – because who else dates 25 women at once!

To me, this encounter is like this...these three guys getting

together and sharing things that only they could understand. Both of them had mysterious and difficult deaths and/or disappearances. Moses died up on Mount Nebo – just short of crossing into the Promised Land. And Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind...leaving his death a complete mystery.

What is clear in both these cases is that despite how they died or left the earth – their ministries had clear successors and paths to continue...the mantle of leadership was passing from Moses to Joshua – *“Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses,”* (Exodus 34:1-12) and from Elijah to Elisha – *“Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.’ And they came to meet him, and bowed to the ground before him,”* (2 Kings 2:1-18).

And so truly this a moment with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, three guys who could understand the weight of leadership of God’s people and the cost of faithfulness in ways

that the people who followed them couldn't. And I'm sure it's not lost on Jesus that he knows that the people who are supposed to be taking the mantle from him when he dies – the disciples...are darn near asleep on that mountain with him! Given that, Jesus must have been a least a little concerned about the effectiveness of his ministry and its longevity...probably in the same way we can get caught up worrying about whether or not the “institution” of the church will live or die.

Now, I find it striking that Jesus chose to take Peter, John, and James up the mountain with him...he did so for a reason – I think he knew that he was nearing the end and that they needed to be present with him as much as possible...he still had so much to teach them and they had so much to learn. And some things you only learn from experience. Whatever they saw made Jesus seem especially bright and dazzling...his appearance was different...more brilliant...impossible to miss.

Peter, of course, wants to savor this whole experience and build a dwelling for Moses and Elijah so that they can all stay on that mountaintop together. It's the

bible-times equivalent of Peter pulling out a selfie stick and saying, “Oooh...everyone squeeze together...we've got to get a picture of this...” and then posting it on Facebook and Instagram for the world to see that yes, he, Peter, had seen Moses and Elijah on that mountaintop. Because we all know that anything put on Facebook is immortal right? IT lives forever! Peter wanted to keep this moment. Forever.

And who doesn't want to do this with “high moments” in our lives? Whether it's a graduation or a wedding or a birth or an award or standing at the top of a 14er or sinking the game winning shot or performing that encore after a standing ovation or seeing your favorite band live for the first time – whatever the “high” is – we want it to last forever...but the truth is – it is gone. In a flash. It's never long enough, is it? Why is that?

Our “lows” are certainly not like that! Our lows tend to hang around forever...like the psalmist we cry out, “*How long O Lord?*” Why does it always seem like the lows last forever and the highs are gone in the blink of an eye?

I don't know but perhaps it has something to do with the fact that our highs tend to energize and recharge us and it doesn't take much to energize or recharge us when we're with people we love or are doing things we love. Another way to say this is: I don't think our highs necessarily teach us something new about ourselves or about the world as much as they affirm or re-affirm what we already love about ourselves or the world or God. The highs feed our existing passions because they almost always happen while we are doing things we're already passionate about or while we're with people we're already passionate about...and so it doesn't take much for us to be charged up by them.

The flip side of this is that our lows may seem like they last a long time because they do! And usually it is the lows in our life that actually teach us something new about ourselves or the world – and often its unsolicited lessons, right! And the truth is it takes a really long time for us to learn new thing and to change. How often do our learnings come from pain? From the hard stuff of life? The stuff that humbles us? The stuff we didn't ask for to happen to

us...the stuff we're *not* passionate about?

In any case, up on this mountain during this high, Peter's reaction is relatable...I get it. He wants the memory to last. He wants to get the snapshot that will always remind him of this moment.

But of course, a cloud comes – as clouds always seem to do – whether it's when someone in the Bible is up on a mountain or whether you're hiking in the afternoon in Colorado. A cloud comes, obscuring things for a moment, the voice from the cloud tells the disciples to *listen* to Jesus...not just to *see* this moment right here and right now (which is so clearly dazzling and visible)...but to *listen* to all that he's been saying and will say. Which is way harder right? To listen to what Jesus says instead of just seeing him dazzle in front of your eyes? Maybe that's why everyone stays quiet about this whole thing.

Which is kind of odd. The staying quiet thing. I feel like that's what happens to us a lot...especially when we're talking about “spiritual highs” or “ways that we see God working in our lives” – we are reticent to share those with

folks. We're afraid it's not PC or that we'll be seen as the crazy religious fanatic or that people will change the way they act or talk around us. (This happened to me Friday night at a neighborhood gathering: *What do you do Anne?* I'm a pastor. *What kind of pastor?* A Baptist pastor? (awkward silence) (sigh) (change of subject). Why does it always have to be this way?! ☺

The truth is: isn't spreading the Good News of God all about telling about the magical and mysterious ways we see God at work in the world? I mean, there's so much "evidence" that people use to say that God doesn't exist – world tragedies and disasters, violence and wars, corrupt people in leadership (inside and outside the church). Shouldn't we then be talking about all the evidence we can point to to show people how God is at work in the world? Whether it's a mountaintop high of something good happening to us or whether it's something we witness happening to someone else – we must tell about it, right? We must be a part of the transforming work of Christ in the world. We can't be silent bystanders. The world needs

our voices. God needs our witness.

This is where the second half of our text comes in. Yes, when Jesus was down emotionally, he looked up and went up (literally), and it's also true that "what goes up...must come down." This is the reality of gravity, which is literally defined as "the natural phenomenon by which all things with mass or energy including planets, stars, galaxies, and even light—are brought toward (or gravitate toward) one another... Gravity is the force by which a planet or other body draws objects toward its center."<sup>1</sup>

Isn't that a beautiful image? It's very grounding and cohesive and centralizing. Gravity bring things toward one another...it's a force that draws us toward our center.

So whether they want to come down from that mountaintop experience or not, Jesus, Peter, John, and James had to come down...they were drawn down...and not just down the mountain but down and back into the community itself...into "life" itself. They were met by a crowd...and quickly in this

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed on 3 March 2019 at <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/what-is-gravity/en/>.

moment Peter, John, and James and all the disciples – were reminded of their “center”...their purpose...their mission...their calling. To help others. Not to experience the joy of Jesus alone, but to share that love and joy with others.

And they are reminded of this because Jesus heals a young boy who is seizing...a boy whose dad says that the other disciples didn't help because they thought they couldn't.

Now a couple weeks ago we saw Jesus getting angry turning over the tables in the Temple...but this is another place we see Jesus lose it bit don't we? He says, “*You faithless and perverse generation how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?*” (Luke 9:41). This is not the Jesus of Matthew 11:28: “*Come to me all you who are weary and are bearing heavy burdens and I will give you rest.*” This is not the Jesus of John 14 who says, “*If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also...*”

No, this Jesus says: “*You faithless and perverse generation how much longer must I be with you and bear*

*with you?*” In the Greek, the word for perverse *diastrophō*, means “to distort or to misinterpret” and faithless *apistos* means “without trust.” In other words Jesus is exasperatingly saying, “*Do you not trust what I have said? How have you distorted or misinterpreted what I've been teaching you all along? You can do this...you can help others...it's not just me. Stop distorting God's power...trust me...you have this power too. Not just me!*”

When Jesus heals the boy Luke writes that everyone was “*astounded at the greatness of God,*” (Luke 9:43) and then he continues and says that right this healing, “*While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let THESE words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands,'*” (Luke 9:43-44). Another way to put this is: “*Stop listening to what people are saying about how amazing I am, because I will be gone soon.*” It's almost as if Jesus is trying to say, once again, “*Soon **you** will have to be the amazing ones.*”

Professor Cláudio Carvalhaes writes, “*While the disciples wanted to hang out there*

*amidst those giants of faith and basking in the glory and transfiguration of Jesus, they were demanded to go back to their lives. However, in between the transfiguration and the noisy streets of our lives, we keep in silence trying to figure out the transfigured Jesus, knowing that we are part of this transfiguration and that means that God will refigure our lives, our thinking, our actions our path. When we meet the transfigured Jesus we are disfigured, transfigured, and refigured.”*<sup>2</sup> That is to say: any mountaintop “God experience” we have should transform us enough that it doesn’t just change our hearts...it changes our actions...how we relate to others in the world.

As we wrap up our spiritual practices of *Passion* + *Humility*, we couldn’t have a more poignant text. We see the passion of the disciples in their love and awe of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah as they plea to stay on that mountain top forever, and we see the humility they experience when they realize they have to come down off that mountain and go back into the community following Jesus and meeting the needs of the people around them.

And Jesus himself shows that to have passion for the gospel is to not to merely bask in the glory of God but to humble oneself in service and love for others...and to humble oneself enough to know when we need to draw up to the mountaintop for a break...for a recharge...for an encounter with God.

You see, passion cannot be separated from humility (or vice versa) in how we follow Jesus and lead our lives. We need the occasional mountain top experiences in our faith – they help re-ignite our passion. And yet the reality is, most of the time, we live in the nitty-gritty reality of the day-to-day...and in the midst of that day-to-day-ness we are humbled by our lows – plenty of them. We are not alone in this – I don’t see any disciples in the Bible who had a peachy life!

This can feel imbalanced to us because deep down (if we’re honest) we want God to “bless us” with an easy life where faith is made real right before our eyes without much effort on our part. But what if the good life is not in fact the easy

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<sup>2</sup> Cláudio Carvalhaes, “Commentary on Luke 9:28-36, (37-43),” *Working Preacher* (Feb. 7, 2016), accessed on March 3, 2019 at

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2756](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2756).



life? What if the good life is making faith real right before our eyes by living and struggling in community together? By healing and helping as the agents of love in the world today?

What if Jesus' transfiguration is about God's glory being revealed on a mountaintop AND God's glory being revealed through how we see and listen to the pain of others...and how we respond?

Think about it. What would be the point of Jesus' ministry for 3+ years if he came and did all these great things and then died and left...and all those things just stopped? Do you think that would glorify God? Or is it that God's glory is revealed in us? We see this happening in the book of Acts with the early church...but do we see it on the pages of our lives?

The next time you are experiencing a true high...or a true low...remember that we need both in our lives. If you are on a high, remember that what goes up must come down...we can't stay up on that high forever – nor are we meant to. And the next time you are in a low place, remember that when you're down – you must look up. Jesus went and found a

mountain to climb up to to pray...and he took his disciples with him. And even on that mountain, God drew his eyes even further up by having Moses and Elijah appear above him. Jesus was renewed. Peter, John, and James were renewed. And then guess what? They were called back down the mountain...back into their life...back into community...and there they met 2 people who were at an all time low in their lives, and Jesus gave that father and son their own high a through his healing...his attention...his love.

Up, down, and all around – God is with us and God's glory is revealed if we have the eyes to see and the guts to act.

We're not meant to live only "up here" (hands high) or "down here" (hands low) --- we're meant to live "right here" (on the community level) so that we can go up and down together.

To be a "Yes, And..." person is to realize that "Yes, you'll have highs and yes you'll have lows"...and both help us recognize our passions and hone in the humility we need in our faith and in our life. And the more humility we have, the

more we are able to listen to and learn from other people's passions. And the more we listen to and learn from other people's passions, the more we discover what we, too, are passionate about.

It's a cycle that is crucial to our faith. And we'll see that even more in the weeks to come as we head into Lent. We'll see that the very passion of Christ is indeed a journey of immense humility. And without Jesus' humility, we don't have his passion (his sacrifice, his love)....and without Jesus' passion...we don't have his resurrection...which is ultimately the highest high of all...the one that puts everything else in perspective. The resurrection doesn't take away all of the lows...it just makes them all the more transformational and endurable. Because it teaches us that no one high or low will last forever, but the glory of God does...and the love of God does too.

Amen.