

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
11 February 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Transfiguration Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***The Palpable Power of Proximity and Presence***

Final sermon in the series, *The Well-BEing of Jesus*

***Luke 9:28-36 and Luke 8:40-48***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

*Read from center chancel:*

*“When I pushed through the crowd” by Madeleine L’Engle*

When I pushed through the crowd,  
jostled, bumped, elbowed by the  
curious  
who wanted to see what everyone  
else  
was so excited about,  
all I could think of was my pain  
and that perhaps if I could touch  
him,  
this man who worked miracles,  
cured diseases,  
even those as foul as mine,  
I might find relief.  
I was tired from hurting,  
exhausted, revolted by my body,  
unfit for any man, and yet not let  
loose  
from desire and need. I wanted to  
rest,  
to sleep without pain or filthiness  
or torment.  
I don’t really know why  
I thought he could help me  
when all the doctors  
with all their knowledge  
had left me still drained  
and bereft of all that makes  
a woman’s life worth living.  
Well: I’d seen him with some  
children

and his laughter was quick and  
merry  
and reminded me of when I was  
young and well,  
though he looked tired; and he was  
as old as I am.  
Then there was that leper,  
but lepers have been cured  
before—

No, it wasn’t the leper,  
or the man cured of palsy,  
or any of the other stories of  
miracles,  
or at any rate that was the least of  
it;  
I had been promised miracles too  
often.  
I saw him ahead of me in the  
crowd  
and there was something in his  
glance  
and in the way his hand rested  
briefly  
on the matted head of a small boy  
who was getting in everybody’s  
way,  
and I knew that if only I could get  
to him,  
not to bother him, you understand,  
not to interrupt, or to ask him for  
anything,  
not even his attention,  
just to get to him and touch him. . .

I didn't think he'd mind, and he  
 needn't even know.  
 I pushed through the crowd  
 and it seemed that they were  
 deliberately  
 trying to keep me from him.  
 I stumbled and fell and someone  
 stepped  
 on my hand and I cried out  
 and nobody heard. I crawled to my  
 feet  
 and pushed on and at last I was  
 close,  
 so close I could reach out  
 and touch with my fingers  
 the hem of his garment.

Have you ever been near  
 when lightning struck?  
 I was, once, when I was very small  
 and a summer storm came without  
 warning  
 and lightning split the tree  
 under which I had been playing  
 and I was flung right across the  
 courtyard.  
 That's how it was.  
 Only this time I was not the child  
 but the tree  
 and the lightning filled me.  
 He asked, "Who touched me?"  
 and people dragged me away,  
 roughly,  
 and the men around him were  
 angry at me.

"Who touched me?" he asked.  
 I said, "I did, Lord,"  
 So that he might have the lightning  
 back  
 which I had taken from him when I  
 touched  
 his garment's hem.

He looked at me and I knew then  
 that only he and I knew about the  
 lightning.  
 He was tired and emptied  
 but he was not angry.  
 He looked at me  
 and the lightning returned to him  
 again,  
 though not from me, and he smiled  
 at me  
 and I knew that I was healed.  
 Then the crowd came between us  
 and he moved on, taking the  
 lightning with him,  
 perhaps to strike again.

Many thanks to Nancy Susman  
 for sending me that poem by  
 Madeleine L'Engle entitled,  
 "When I pushed through the  
 crowd." In many ways, it  
 encapsulates the heart of my  
 sermon today: *The Palpable  
 Power of Proximity and  
 Presence*. (Yes, I know that's a  
 lot of P's!)

**Palpable** meaning something  
 you can touch, feel, perceive.

**Power** meaning something that  
 creates or has impact or  
 influence.

**Proximity** meaning nearness or  
 closeness in space, time, or  
 relationship.

**Presence** meaning the state or  
 existing, or *being with* a thing or  
 person.

The Palpable Power of Proximity and Presence. Which is to say, there is something felt and experienced in a specific, impactful way when we draw near and stay close. Or, said in a different way, when we draw near and stay near, something unique and impactful happens – we feel something, experience something, perceive something, learn something.

The power of the gospel is that Jesus came down to earth as an expression of God's love drawing near to us. And then in his ministry he is always showing us how to draw near to one another as expressions of that same Love. And rest assured that "drawing near" does not have to be as complex or as dramatic as Taylor Swift traveling 5,700 miles on her private jet from Japan to Las Vegas to draw near to her beloved Travis Kelce for the Super Bowl today.

In fact, in today's texts, we have two examples of "drawing near" that are fairly simple. We have God drawing near to Jesus through a mystical experience in prayer on a mountain, and we have a suffering woman drawing near to Jesus as she reaches out to him for healing.

In both cases, proximity matters in order to experience power and presence, something "felt" or "known." Jesus creates space/time to draw near to God. And the woman puts herself in a place to be near to Jesus, *in case* the opportunity arises to reach out. The possibility, the opportunity for presence...it begins with proximity.

The intentionality in both stories from Luke's gospel today reminds us of how our wellbeing takes initiative: initiative to act, initiative to receive, initiative to wait, to reach, to see.

There is a palpable power in proximity and presence. We know this to be true and yet we still often miss these moments and opportunities to be present to one another and to draw near to God.

I wonder how many garment tugs we've missed because of our fast paced life and busyness and our focus on where we are supposed to be at what time and with who. I wonder how many mystical experiences we've short changed ourselves of because we haven't lingered long enough in stillness and quiet before God?

I wonder, when we ask with wrote pleasantries, “how are you?” how many moments of healing connection we’ve missed because we didn’t linger in the hallway long enough to truly hear how someone answered that question? Or conversely, I wonder, how many times we’ve suffered in silence, suffered alone, because to reach out for help, to tug on someone else’s garment for a moment of their time just felt too intrusive, too vulnerable, too needy?

One of the things we learn about Jesus own well-BEing in Luke 8 is that though he is on his way to attend to the dying 12 year old daughter of a very important official, he is not too busy, or too preoccupied to feel the touch of the woman who had been ostracized from her community for 12 years, who had been told by doctors “I’m sorry there is nothing we can do for you” for 12 years, who had been confined to her home for 12 years, who had been *physically bleeding* for 12 years! Think about the duration and chronic nature of this woman’s suffering enough...the everydayness of it...the unrelenting nature of it...how she had adapted her entire life around it. And I know some of

you don’t have to think, you *know*.

But then one day in one moment, she made a decision to take a chance. To reach out. She had heard of Jesus. Seen him. And so, she drew close to him. Reached out and touched him. This exchange of touch took maybe one second and then for Jesus to locate her and speak to her took at most one or two minutes – and yet in that short span of time – an entire life and livelihood was forever changed.

This woman – even in the most difficult of circumstances and the most crowded of spaces and the most criticizing of crowds – this woman experienced something powerful simply because she put herself in proximity to Jesus and reached out. Jesus called that powerful thing that the two of them experienced – Jesus called “Faith.” “*Daughter, your faith has made you well.*”

Whatever this exchange of ‘power’ – this lightning (as L’Engle says) – Jesus names that exchange as faith. It is *not* a ‘profession of faith’ that makes the woman well, meaning she does not say some correct theological statement of belief, like “I accept you Jesus as my

Lord and Savior.” No, it is not words that make the woman well. It is touch. It is proximity. It is an exchange of presence. Faith, here in this text, is defined simply as ‘reaching out’ – nothing more, nothing less.

And – we don’t actually know what was healed. The text never says her bleeding stops. We like to hope that happened. But we don’t know. Jesus says her “faith” (her reaching) has made her “well,” but we know by now that “wellness” is far more than just physical health and healing.

Perhaps the bleeding did stop. Or perhaps this exchange of reaching out and being seen (finally) and being heard (finally) and being taken seriously as a person (finally) – maybe that healed her from discouragement and insecurity and gave her the gumption she needed to go once again to another physician to ask for help. Or perhaps this exchange of reaching out and being seen, out in public among the crowds, was simply enough for others (especially religious folks) to see her as ‘healed’ (and hear Jesus say she was healed) and therefore invite her back into spiritual community and into relationship with them. Which, to be honest, may have been an

even better healing than a physical one. Suffering is awful. Suffering alone...is inhumane.

How the woman is healed, or what is healed, is a mystery. What is *not* a mystery is that she is made well. And what is *not* a mystery is that she put herself in proximity to Jesus, she took initiative to draw near to the hope and mystery of an inkling/a feeling about this man, about the Divine (we might say), even when she had no idea what would happen or if it would even matter or make a difference at all...or even if who or what she was reaching toward was the divine at all.

Perhaps this means that the well-BEing of Jesus and our own wellness too, is more about drawing near to one another and to God, about putting ourselves in the proximity of community, of “presence,” than it is about praying the ‘right’ prayers with certain words or espousing certain beliefs or even doing certain deeds.

And if Luke 8 is about drawing near, physically, to another person, and reaching out to those around us here on earth for healing and help and wholeness and wellness, then Luke 9 is about staying close

when God draws near to us – in ways mystical and mysterious...and not shutting out or shutting down those experiences just because we don't understand them or because they are a little weird or odd or perhaps make us feel embarrassed or maybe is something we don't want to share at testimony time because who knows people might think we are "out of our mind" – but guess what? That would make sense because these experiences ARE "out of our mind" and that is what they are intended to be! They are not supposed to make rational sense to our *mind*...not everything is about our intellect, our rationality...it is well with our bodies, souls, hearts, remember? And yes, our minds too, but we cannot confine to God to just that which we can see and know and understand.

I usually approach the experience of the Transfiguration from the perspective of the disciples, but this week as I looked at it from Jesus' perspective – new things stuck out to me. Here was Jesus, pulling away to pray...stopping to rest on a mountaintop after a busy time of ministry (just a chapter earlier he had healed a woman bleeding for 12 years and raised a 12 year old girl

from death, just to name two things he had been up to) – and then in this state of prayer and rest...what happened? Two of *his ancestors*, Moses and Elijah, showed up! Mentors he had never met, yet people whose in whose footsteps he followed and in whose words and prophecies he lived.

Can you imagine, in this time of Jesus' authority being questioned by religious leaders, of Jesus wondering if his mission was going well or if his ministry even mattered...can you imagine as Jesus himself was teaching that he came "not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them" yet wondering, perhaps, if he was even doing that well and in the timeline he was supposed to be doing it...can you imagine what it must have felt like and meant to him to have this prayer-like, dream-like experience of seeing two of his ancestors of the faith...and not just any two but THE two (Moses representing the Law, Elijah representing the Prophets)! Can you imagine what it must have felt like to Jesus to have these two ancestors right before him, near in proximity to him (in this mystical, spiritual way)...and how encouraging this must have been to him? How even hearing

the voice of God reminding him again that he was God's son, that he was Chosen for this, that he had something worthy to say...can you imagine how that helped him "keep on keeping on?"

Here were two leaders who knew what it was like to lead a people in ways that they did not always understand and in directions they did not always want to go. And here was Jesus, doing the exact same thing, and probably feeling pretty alone and like nobody understood how tough his mission was.

We don't know what Jesus was praying that day on the mountain, but perhaps he was saying, "*Come near, O God, come near.*" And the way that God chose to come near, was by sending two ancestors to appear to him in this dreamlike vision. To help him feel less alone. Yes, he had the disciples with him. But just because people are around us does not mean we are not lonely. One can be alone in a crowd...just ask the hemorrhaging woman.

So sometimes, then, we need those who have traveled difficult roads before us – who know specifically what we are going through – to show us the

way. To encourage us. To lead us on.

We need our ancestors (our foremothers and forefathers) – their stories from history and their presence in our dreams – to remind us What Has Been and What Can Be. To help us see beyond what is physically in front of our eyes and to inspire imagination and liberation and hope and healing. What a palpable, powerful moment of encouragement Jesus must have felt to be in proximity to Moses and Elijah (even if just for a moment) and to rest in the presence of God (even if just for a moment.)

Nowadays, we don't talk too much about mystical experiences as essential for our wellbeing, but scripture seems to think they are. And for any of you who have felt the presence of a loved one at the end of your bed, or heard their voice whispering wisdom in your ear, or seen them beckoning you on in a vision – you know. The veil between this world and the next is thin, as they say. And in these 'thin spaces' – in dreams, sleeping or waking, to draw strength from our ancestors is like a balm for the soul.

But mystical experiences do not happen when we are so busy that we are not resting enough. Or when we do not draw away to pray. Or allow our gaze to wander or our mind to dream.

In her book, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, Tricia Hersey (the founder of The Nap Ministry) writes about “A Daydreaming Moment [She] Experienced While Grieving:

*As my eyes closed, I began to imagine my braids rising to become propellers that would allow me to levitate and fly away to another planet. This planet has never experienced racism, sexism, classism, or any type of hate. People sleep up to eighteen hours a day like cats. During the sleep time, their dreams produce all the labor they need to survive and thrive. The food is grown via dreams. The planet is a sanctuary for Black bodies that have been destroyed on Earth via violence and oppression. Those people are now on the council that serve as the spiritual advisors to the entire planet. Trayvon Martin is there, Rekia Boyd is there, Sandra Bland is there, George Floyd is there, and Breonna Taylor is there. They*

*are all together, wearing white smiling and resting.*

Hersey explains, “This vision came to me in thirty-minute daydreaming session. It soothed me and allowed a quiet space to grieve and rest. It allowed me to feel in my body and mind an alternative to what has been done. I call my daydreaming *brain love*.”<sup>1</sup>

Hersey speaks of the importance of dreaming for liberation, and how visions of and with our ancestors impact our ability to imagine a world beyond the one we know. (And imagining a world beyond the world we know is exactly what Jesus was up to here on earth! Pointing us toward the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Hersey writes: “*Dreaming creates energy, allows me to connect with my deepest ideas and offers space. Space to just be and to become free from the demands of a fast-moving, nonstop culture is so important. Without it we will remain caught up in the endless cycle of trauma that grind culture creates.*”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York, NY: Little, Brown Spark) 2022, pg 93.

<sup>2</sup> Hersey, pg 106.



*“...I believe in the portal of resting; there are answers waiting for us there.”<sup>3</sup>*

Luke 9 explains that Jesus was praying on the mountain, resting, yet the whole scene is set as a dreamscape, and regardless of whether Jesus was awake or asleep as Moses and Elijah appeared, their mystical appearance, their encouragement in “talking to him” (as the text says), and their prophesying about what he would “fulfill in Jerusalem” is nothing short of an ancestral appearance the likes of which we see throughout the stories in our history of brave Africans brought to America against their will who did not allow their enslavement keep them from dreaming toward liberation.

This reminds me of the hush harbors of Antebellum America. During slavery a hush harbor (or hush arbor, brush harbor or brush arbor) was a secret, hidden place where enslaved women, men, and children would gather to practice their religious traditions in the middle of the night. These were secret, places – overgrown with leafy

trees and bushes. Christianity was being forced on African slaves after being transported to the Americas, and yet, in these hush harbors it was safe for them to invoke the presence of their ancestors and to remember and incorporate their African religious traditions – such as drumbeats – which have led to the rhythmic call and response tradition in African American worship today. In these hush harbors, where enslaved Africans could meet their ancestors in memory, they could also dream of freedom, invoke a gospel of liberation, express their emotions, and find solidarity in the presence of the Divine and one another.<sup>4</sup> They remembered What Was to draw them near to What Could Be.

In these secret gatherings, the spirituals were born, such as *Steal Away to Jesus*:

*Steal away, steal away,  
steal away to Jesus!  
Steal away, steal away home,  
I ain't got long to stay here.*

*My Lord, He calls me,  
Green trees are bending,  
Poor sinners stand a trembling;*

<sup>3</sup> Hersey, pgs 103-104.

<sup>4</sup> Information accessed at <https://www.attawellsummer.com/forthosebefore> and through a lecture by Rev. Dr. Eugene M. Downing, Jr. at

Montview Presbyterian Church on February 4, 2024 entitled *The Sacred Art of Black Preaching Part I*, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYEEK0mZwQw>.

*[Yet] The trumpet sounds within  
my soul;  
I ain't got long to stay here.*

Stealing away to Jesus was not just a desire to be in close spiritual proximity to Jesus, but to literally, draw near to one another (to other siblings and souls on the journey) in secret, in these leafy hush harbors, so that they could organize together and dream of being free...

“Encrypted directions lead believers to these hush harbor sites. The first people to arrive at the meeting used a broken tree bough to point towards the hush harbor. The slaves then hung quilts to create a tabernacle, dampening them to further suppress the sound.”<sup>5</sup>

Such ‘stealing away’ to these hush harbors took great courage, for if they were caught, these enslaved dreamers and worshippers would be severely beaten or killed.<sup>6</sup> And beyond courage, it took intentionality and dreaming and space and time and drawing near and not rushing.

What we learn through these stories – both in the gospels and in black history – is that drawing near to one another and to God is a way to experience something powerful, and palpable, in our faith. We cannot dream or pray or reach out or pay attention to something tugging at us or appearing around us and before us if we do not slow down, intentionally create space in our lives for presence, and allow for mystery to speak to us as much as (or more so) than material evidence or rational knowledge.

Don’t we want the world to be more than we see today? There is no limit to how God works in our lives. There are no bounds to how God speaks or moves or inspires or liberates. So then, we must steal away to Jesus – and dream and reach for the kingdom...and never grow tired of drawing near to the God who is always drawing near to us.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Information accessed on February 11, 2024 at <https://forthosebefore.tumblr.com/post/153486420248/during-antebellum-america-a-hush-harbor-or-hush>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.