

**Sermon for 3-3-19**  
**Gospel -- Luke 9:28-36**  
**The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard**  
**Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH**

Most film critics absolutely trashed the 2017 big-budget musical "The Greatest Showman," which starred Hugh Jackman as P.T. Barnum. Along with being trite and predictable, the movie was criticized for its rosy portrayal of Barnum and his circus as a cutting-edge vehicle for empowerment, when in reality Barnum was a man who exploited his performers ('curiosities,' he called them) to make a quick buck. While I know the movie presents a wildly inaccurate version of history... I can't help but LOVE the music. The "Greatest Showman" soundtrack gets a lot of play at my house.

Clearly, I have mixed feelings about this film. There are some really great messages about self-worth and dignity, breaking down barriers and holding your head high even when others look down on you. But there's also a subtext to the entire thing that bothers me, and I think we see it in much of what comes out of Hollywood... and it's nothing new. It's this idea that life can and should be a nonstop parade of drama and excitement. If we are living well, we're moving from one exhilarating experience to another: constant glitter and surprises, extremes of emotion, dramatic confrontations and declarations -- mountaintop experiences over and over again. No boredom, no drudgery, never a day that like the one before... and whatever pain we may experience is temporary, and will certainly be resolved neatly and smoothly in two hours or less. *Now that's a life worth living!*

Listen to these lyrics from the film.

From a song called "Come Alive":

*"You stumble through your days  
Got your head hung low  
Your sky's a shade of grey..."*

*'Cause you're just a dead man walking  
Thinking that's your only option  
But you can flip the switch and brighten up your darkest day."*

From another song, called "Never Enough":

*"I'm trying to hold my breath  
Let it stay this way,  
Can't let this moment end..."*

*All the shine of a thousand spotlights  
All the stars we steal from the night sky  
Will never be enough*

*Towers of gold are still too little  
These hands could hold the world but it'll  
Never be enough... for me."<sup>i</sup>*

Now you may be wondering, what on earth does any of this have to do with the Transfiguration? Hear me out: I think this sentiment, the feeling of these songs and this film, has quite a bit in common with Luke's version of the Transfiguration.

Consider the experience of Peter and James and John. These lucky three have the privilege of standing beside Jesus on the mountaintop and witnessing something truly phenomenal -- and they've witnessed miracles before, remember. But this... this is different. Peter and James and John watch, completely riveted, as Jesus begins to change:

"[W]hile he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, **they saw his glory** and the two men who stood with him."<sup>ii</sup>

They saw his glory. Peter and James and John saw, with their own eyes, a visual manifestation of the fullness of God's glory in Jesus Christ.

How dramatic! How amazing! How utterly awe-inspiring! I wonder, did Peter and James and John feel as if, all of a sudden, their eyes had been opened, and now everything made sense? Was this the most holy, most precious, most perfectly fulfilling moment of their entire lives thus far?

Can we really blame them for wanting to stay in it?

Good old Peter -- he might get it wrong, but he's the only one with the guts to speak up -- Peter says "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."<sup>iiii</sup>

Peter and his friends don't want this moment to end. They want to prolong this amazing sense of fulfillment and joy here on the mountaintop. They don't want to go back down the mountain; they want to stay right here, forever, if they can. They don't want to return to the usual rhythms of their days; they want to stay where the action is.

The Transfiguration is a Hollywood-worthy moment! Just think what a Steven Spielberg or a James Cameron could do with this -- Imagine it!

And we'd eat it up, wouldn't we? We love our dramatic mountaintop experiences. We love being dazzled, enthralled, captivated. We crave those moments of exhilaration and excitement. That's why we go to the movies, isn't it?

Of course, there's a big problem here -- in the Scripture, in the movies, and in our lives.

We can't spend our entire lives in those mountaintop moments. We all have them, of course, some of us more than others, but we also know that most

of life is not dramatic, emotional, earth-shattering experiences. This was true for Peter and James and John, and it's true for us too.

What if, instead of grieving over the transitory nature of life and wishing we could stop time and dwell permanently in our holiest experiences, what if we could appreciate those precious moments for what they are, bid them a grateful farewell when they end, and carry their lessons forward as we go about our days?

The late Dutch author, professor, and pastor Henri Nouwen described it thusly:

*"At some moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend... It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: 'This is it ... everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here.'*

*This is the experience that Peter, James, and John had [in the Transfiguration]. They wanted that moment to last forever. This is the experience of the fullness of time. These moments are given to us so that we can remember them when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless."<sup>iv</sup>*

While Peter and James and John are witnessing this astounding display of holiness on the mountaintop, what's happening down below? We didn't have this part in our reading, but in the next few verses, Luke tells us that the other disciples, the ones who didn't get to go up on the mountain, have been trying to cast out a demon unsuccessfully. A distraught father has brought his son to them, pleading with them to heal his child. They've tried everything they can think of, to no avail. They're probably feeling frustrated and exhausted, running out of faith and hope. And it's not until Jesus comes down -- until the full glory of God in human form, the Word made flesh, is present there at the bottom of the mountain -- that healing and salvation can occur.

That's reality. That's life. Sometimes we're being dazzled on the mountaintop; sometimes we're suffering in the valley; and oftentimes we're somewhere in between. But the glory of Christ, the fullness of God for us and with us and in us, is everywhere, in every moment -- if we can remember our truth.

What a gift! What a gift it is to have those grace-filled mountaintop experiences.

What a gift to witness, for one brief moment, the full and phenomenal glory of God.

What a gift it is to know that we, in all our weakness, with all our faults and failures, are capable of blessed communion with our Savior.

And what a gift it is to carry the dazzling light of our Lord in our hearts -- to shine a path down the mountains and through the valleys, to guide us in His way of truth and love and mercy all of our days, whatever may come. **Amen.**

---

<sup>i</sup> lyrics from "Come Alive" and "Never Enough" by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 9:29-32 *NRSV*

<sup>iii</sup> vs. 33

<sup>iv</sup> <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-mountaintop-experience/>