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The Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Kick Off Sunday

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Mark 9:1-13
Back to Sea Level

In the book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, Donald Miller describes a trip he took with friends to Peru to hike the Inca Trail. The hike began in the Sacred Valley, along a river that runs through a desert canyon, with the snow-covered peaks of the Andes looming above them. Their guide explained that if they stayed on the trail that ran along the river, Machu Picchu was about six hours away. In ancient times, the river was used as a commercial trail, but if you visited Machu Picchu on a pilgrimage, you had to take the Inca Trail. When he said this, he pointed toward the Andes, up toward the snow, above the thick trees and the rain forest, and then he said it would take them four days to get there. "Why would the Incas make people take the long route?" one of the hikers asked. "Because the emperor knew," said the guide, "the more painful the journey to Machu Picchu, the more the traveler would appreciate the city, once he got there."

The disciple, Peter, was looking for a way to get where he was going without having to take the long route. Peter had climbed the mountain with Jesus and he was looking for a way not to have to hike back down, he was looking for a short cut to the promised ending. I have always been puzzled about Peter's idea on the Mount of Transfiguration that he should build tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. I always heard this as kind of a Boy Scout trying to earn badges with the Scout leader after their day of hiking. "I'll gather the wood, I'll start the fire, I'll set up camp, Jesus. Let me show you how ready I am to be your disciple." But now I have some appreciation for how little this had to do with Peter earning points and everything to do with Peter avoiding his fears. On the mountaintop, Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus transfigured into shining white in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

It had to have been totally incredible and must have seemed sufficient for these disciples to confirm their faith. 'It's true – Jesus is the Messiah, point proven, work finished, job done' - according to Peter but not according to Jesus. There was still work to be done. And Peter remembered the things Jesus said to them just before their hike up the mountain and his fears ruined the moment.

Mark chapter 8 says: *Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Jesus. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter.*

Jesus told his friends he was going to suffer and Peter could not stand the thought of it. Peter tried unsuccessfully to argue with Jesus about how things were going to play themselves out in such an awful way but Jesus insisted it was true. But then with this episode fresh in Peter's mind, when they were up on the mountaintop Peter had a thought: maybe if they could all just stay up there, stay on the mountain

in some nice tents, and hang with Moses and Elijah forever then none of that suffering would need to happen. Let's just stay here with this glory and this transfiguration and these nice white clothes. Let's skip over the hard parts of the story and get to the ending. Let's skip the passion and move right along to Easter. But Jesus knows there is no short cut to glory.

New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa writes, "What the disciples and Mark's audience need to understand is that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing and subject of dazzling glory, and the Son of Man, who will be betrayed and persecuted and crucified. The disciples, in common with many Christians throughout the church's life, want to have the glory that they can see without the message that they must hear, but the two cannot be separated. Over and over Mark lifts up both aspects of Jesus' identity, relentlessly recalling that the suffering will yield to triumph, but that the triumph cannot be had without the price of the cross."

There are no short cuts to the kind of full and true glory God intended for Jesus and for us. But that is hard news to hear sometimes. Mark's gospel tells us that Peter is actually just down right terrified. And sometimes when you are terrified you come up with some pretty dumb ideas - building tents for the greatest prophets and the Messiah of the world is probably pretty high up there on the list of bad ideas. Here God interjects from a cloud and says to Peter and the other disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" And the next thing we know they are not camping on the mountain, they are heading back down to sea level, once again taking the long road with Jesus.

The life of discipleship is an invitation to journey with Jesus on the long and winding road of faith. The life of faith is about time and time again, taking the longer route. A long and often arduous journey, full of grueling climbs and treacherous valleys and also stunning vistas and green pastures, a journey we travel in hopes of encountering God's glory. But along the way there are times when we would give anything for a shorter route.

At the end of August, I spent an amazing week in Sundance, Utah with my kids and my parents and my brothers. On our last full day I climbed Mount Timpanogos with my youngest brother. It was a grueling 17-mile hike to nearly 12,000ft above sea level. We started in total darkness with headlamps and we hiked above the tree line before sunrise. We spent the morning hours getting through boulder fields and winding through countless switchbacks up the face of the mountain. We hit the saddle and had our lunch and then began the final mile hike to the summit. When we got there—we signed our names in the summit register, took a few pictures, looked around for a minute and then Jason shrugged and asked rhetorically, "Shall we?" Maybe I knew how Peter felt in that moment because I did not really want to leave the mountaintop. It had been a pinnacle of my summer and the hike back to down felt symbolic of the end of my sabbatical and the return to the real world. But you can't stay on the mountaintop forever. And so here we are!

Let me tell you that sometimes in life we would give anything for a shorter route, a path to expedite us through whatever it is that is hard in our lives: the grief process or the treatments plans or the therapy sessions or the AA meetings or the job interviews or the night classes or the long days of worry, weight, and toil. We just wish to fast forward, to skip ahead, to show up at the end by an easier route. And yet it so rarely is the way of things. Certainly for Jesus it was not the way he was called to travel.

Tradition tells us that Moses and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, did not die, that God raised them in glory before they tasted death. Yet Jesus, greater than these, the Son of God, the Beloved, took the longer road, the road that took him through the valleys of the shadow of death, through a garden of agony, and straight to the cross. Jesus went back down that mountain, with us and for us. The disciples saw the magnificent view of Jesus transfigured and God's presence in their midst and they longed to stay there forever. But what they failed to appreciate was that even on their descent, even on the difficult road ahead, God's glory would be all around them. The journey with Jesus in all seasons and all terrains of life is the Way to God. God is not revealed only on the summits of life but God's glory appears also in the darkest moments of our lives. Just as God's glory was in fact revealed on the cross.

Donald Miller took the long road to Machu Picchu and after four days of climbing nearly fourteen thousand feet and descending back into the valley describes arriving at last. "We didn't hike to the Sun Gate the next morning; we ran. We ran on blistered feet and sore legs. We got there and it was fogged in, so we sat along the rock, on the ruins, and waited for the fog to burn off. We sat and sang songs. And it was like our guide had said, "You can take a train and then a bus, and you can hike a mile to the Sun Gate." But the people who took the bus didn't experience the city as we experienced the city. The journey made the city more beautiful. The story made us different characters than we would have been if we showed up at the ending by an easier way.

Henri Nouwen uses the phrase, "The long walk of faith." That is just what it was for Christ and so it is for those who seek to faithfully follow Him. Jesus invites us to take the longer route—the Way that leads to discipleship, the Way where God is revealed, the Way that leads finally to glory. Right before the mountain climb of the transfiguration story Jesus spoke to the disciples and the crowds that had gathered and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

That is our call as Christians: To follow Jesus all the days of our lives. And when we do so, God's light will shine for us on the long walk of faith. We have hiked up the mountain, we have caught a glimpse of God's glory, and we have heard the call to discipleship.

Shall we? Onward. Amen.