

“High Water and Other Hazards of Faith”
A sermon by Matt Matthews
from the front row, First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Matthew 14:22-33

August 9, 2020

I’ve always been intrigued by this passage. In the midst of much activity, Jesus dismissed the crowds and “went up the mountain by himself to pray.” In these words, I find a pattern for spiritual living: take time out to pray. Take holy pause in the midst of a busy life. Work is balanced by rest. Time with the crowd is balance by time alone with God. The world’s noise is soothed by God’s whisper.

In the midst of much busyness, Jesus “went up the mountain by himself to pray.”

In this passage Jesus goes from full speed ahead to pause, to repose, to prayer.

Many Christian people (and people of other religions, I’m sure) think that if we were truly spiritual, if we were really faithful, we’d spend more time on the mountain in prayer. (That would be a good thing.) We’d not only disengage from the world for a little while to pray, if we were *really* spiritual, we’d pray full time and remained disengaged from the world forever. We’d forget the world in our state of wonderful, wonderful prayer.

That’s what Peter, James, and John wanted to do when they were with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. Do you remember that story? Jesus takes these disciples up the mountain, and once there, Moses and Eljah show up. Jesus becomes transformed in white light. And Peter, James, and John get the bright idea to build booths so that they can stay there. Let’s remain here, they say. Let’s stay in this state of religious bliss.

Many of us think the same thing when we experience a religious high. *I wish I could stay here and ride this wave of wonder forever.*

But Jesus emphatically says no to that idea.

He tells his disciples on the mountain of transfiguration they can’t stay. They have work to do in the valley. Jesus didn’t come into the world to be enshrined on a mountain top with nice views; he came to serve the world. He came to meet the beggars in the alley, and the immigrants in the lines at the border, and the sick over in the hospital, and the young who feel awkward and alone in their teenage years. Jesus came to sit with the lonely; Jesus came to laugh with the prostitutes; Jesus came to make friends with fishermen and tax collectors. To redeem the world, Jesus knew he needed to get to know the world. He needed to meet the people of the world and to spend time with them. Jesus knew that he needed to know what people needed redeeming from. Jesus’s work wasn’t on a mountain or on a throne or in some state of prayer-like bliss, Jesus’ place was side by side with his people.

At this moment, I can’t remember an instance where Jesus said to somebody, “Hey, I’ll pray for you.” No, by word and deed, he befriended people and got his hands dirty by becoming involved in their lives, by being a faithful neighbor, by meeting them particularly in the sad places where boils rupture the skin, and tears streak the eyes, and hunger pangs roil through the stomach. Jesus doesn’t spend 24-7 locked in some prayer closet.

John Bell says that the goal of Christian Spirituality is to get us elbow deep into the work of the gospel by getting elbow deep in our community.

