

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
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Praise Y'all the Lord!

Jesus went up on the mountain top. He took with him Peter, James, and John. And he was transfigured before them. His appearance changed so that he seemed to shine with a heavenly light. God revealed to those few witnesses the glory of the true nature of Jesus, his divine nature, which shone through his human nature.

Peter had an understandable response. He wanted to build three dwellings, for Jesus and for Moses and Elijah—the Law and the Prophets—who had each met God on a mountain top before, and who now appeared with Jesus. But Jesus knew that his fate was not on that mountain top, to be bathed in glory, but rather on a little hill outside of Jerusalem, to be clothed in shame. He did not come to be glorified in this world. He came instead to humble himself and to be with us. We may meet him on mountain tops still, but Jesus is to be found among the lowliest, and in the midst of the mundane, day-to-day details of our lives.

We do not live our lives on mountain tops, do we? Sometimes we find ourselves in deep, dark valleys; sometimes we ride high along a ridge for a while. Our lives may be punctuated by mountain top experiences, but they are lived mostly in the broad plains between high ground and low. Most of our lives are pretty boring. Nothing much happens. Nothing much changes day to day. Most of the time, it is easy not to think about God's presence with us. It is particularly in the highs and the lows when God's presence and providence comes into sharp focus.

We've had quite a low as a parish this week, and it is clear that we are all feeling for Kris' family, and for ourselves. In the midst of the shock and pain of losing our choir director though there have been many moments of grace, many instances of God's presence with

individuals, and even in the events surrounding Kris' death. I don't mean to minimize the enormity of the loss; its unexpectedness and its suddenness both sharpen that pain to a fine point. No, but it is for this very reason that Jesus came down from that mountain, leaving behind the luminous glory, the heavenly voice, the vision of divine power, and went back down into the lowlands, to the places where life is lived, to be with us in the boring times and especially as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

God is with us. Jesus walks alongside of us. We feel that presence in many ways, sometimes very powerfully in the presence of those who love us and care for us, those who are there for us when we need them. But even if we fail to perceive that presence, it doesn't mean that God has abandoned us. God is with us. Jesus stays by our side, as he has promised to be with us until the end of the age. He will get us through.

We may reasonably ask: "Why?" I have asked why. I know you have too. Why do bad things happen to good people? It is a universal question. I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you this morning to proclaim from this pulpit. In fact, I think anyone who claims to have the answer to that question is just deluding himself. We don't know why bad things happen to good people. We don't know why wonderful people die in the prime of their life. Jesus never promised that bad things would not happen. In fact, quite the opposite, for those who choose to follow him, we are advised to take up our cross. He never promised that we would be free from suffering. The very love to which we are called virtually ensures suffering. The only pain free existence I can imagine is one devoid of any love, and that existence could only be described as hell.

Jesus never promised us that bad things would not happen, but he did promise us, and his resurrection from the dead has sealed the promise, that nothing that happens, not the worst

possible thing we could imagine, is outside of his ability to redeem. God's sustaining love and the power of forgiveness wins out against the worst evil there is. God's power is made perfect in weakness, both our weakness, and the weakness we see in the cross of Christ. Jesus came down from that mountain top, to walk the way of the cross, the way of suffering and shame, the way of weakness and death. He walked that way so that we would no longer need to fear death, so that we would no longer need to fear separation from God, so that we would no longer need to mourn as those without hope. Our hope is in our Lord, Jesus Christ... crucified, resurrected, ascended to God's right hand. As we walk through the valleys we inevitably face in life, let the vision of Jesus, transfigured in his glory, be a vision that sustains us, a vision of the glory that awaits us all.

I have one final word for you this morning. And that word is: Halleluiah. Spelled with an "A" or an "H", it doesn't matter. It's the same word. Today is "Alleluia Sunday", the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent begins on Wednesday. After today, we will not say the word "Alleluia" in our worship until we make the Easter acclamation at the Easter vigil. During the penitential season of Lent, the avoidance of the word is a mark of our liturgical austerity and a sign of our humility.

Now, you may feel a little funny saying or singing Halleluiah today, given the sorrow that infuses our worship. That's probably because we associate the word with joy and excitement. If we stumbled on a suitcase full of money, we may shout, "Alleluia!" If we found the perfect parking space, we may say it. Indeed, the Easter acclamation, "Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia." Is the most joyful expression of Christian faith there is. So it makes sense that we use it as an equivalent for "Hurray" or "Yippee." But what does the word actually mean?

The word is in fact an entire sentence. It means: Praise ye the Lord! It is second person, plural, imperative; it is a command. "Praise ye the Lord," In modern English we don't have a separate word for "you" that obviously means plural, like ye, as opposed to thee in Old English, or as my Hebrew professor used to say, "Praise y'all the Lord." It is addressed to everyone who hears it. The "Yah" at the end of the word is short for "Yahweh," one of the names for God in the Old Testament. That name is usually translated as "the Lord" out of reverence. So, Halleluiah, praise ye the Lord.

This is of course an expression of joy, but it should not be thought of as simply a "yippee". It is appropriate to proclaim Halleluiah in any number of circumstances. It is less an exclamation of happiness, and more an expression of deep faith and abiding joy. It is less an aphorism, and more a motto for life. When we are happy and thankful, we praise the Lord. When we are facing challenges, we praise the Lord. When we are feeling down, sad and afraid, we praise the Lord. When we say Halleluiah we make a proclamation, we say that God is greater than anything else and worthy of our praise. When we say Halleluiah we lift our own spirits, and those of the people around us.

So today, even though we don't feel like singing or shouting anything happy, let's sing and say Halleluiah with all our hearts, as an expression of our faith and trust in God, as an acceptance that what happens in this life is beyond our wisdom and understanding, and as a way for us to echo here on earth the sentiments that the saints and angels in heaven sing eternally.

Amen