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Better Poets & Painters This Time Around
Annette Hill Briggs
Matthew 16:24-17:8 (Contemporary English Version)

*²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. ²⁵ If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it. ²⁶ What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What would you give to get back your soul? ²⁷ The Son of Man will soon come in the glory of his Father and with his angels to reward all people for what they have done. ²⁸ I promise you that some of those standing here will not die before they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom. **17** Six days later Jesus took Peter and the brothers James and John with him. They went up on a very high mountain where they could be alone. ² There in front of the disciples, Jesus was completely changed. His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.*

³ All at once Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus. ⁴ So Peter said to him, "Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While Peter was still speaking, the shadow of a bright cloud passed over them. From the cloud a voice said, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!" ⁶ When the disciples heard the voice, they were so afraid that they fell flat on the ground. ⁷ But Jesus came over and touched them. He said, "Get up and don't be afraid!" ⁸ When they opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus.

Chapter 16 marks the end of the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Here Peter calls Jesus "the Messiah"; and Jesus calls Peter "Satan." Those with ears to hear know the struggle isn't local. It's cosmic. It is personal, however. The disciples learn that the future includes a cross, prepared and waiting. One for each of them, to do with as they decide. And for us – readers, followers – ever since. Whatever we decide, nothing is what it seems. Or, maybe said better: everything is more than we can begin to imagine.

Let's pray: Good and holy God of space and time and everything therein, that we should propose to speak to you is silliness beyond reckoning. And yet, we come, giving voice to we know not what. Our wishes? Our fears? Whatever counts as good, O God, help us to wish for that. Whatever keeps us from you, may that be our fear. Amen.

The next time he goes off alone to pray, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John. Either the other nine weren't invited or they didn't want to go. They did not have a good time in his absence – that we know for sure. How would the church be different had Jesus chosen poets and painters as his disciples?

Poets and painters might have left us able to sit with this, knowing better how to carry it in our hearts and minds, in our life together. Because the words do not suffice. All the words in the world make this – whatever this thing is – no less unfamiliar in our mouths for two thousand years of saying it. This thing. This event. This mystery. This illusion. This vision. This experience. This *miracle?* called “Transfiguration.” And if it is a miracle, what makes it so? That three humans claimed to see it? Maybe this is how Jesus always prayed – with ancient prophet friends?...but “ancient” only *to us*. Peter, James and John didn't see something new, only something new *to them*. And something of Jesus they have never seen before, something they did not expect, something for which they had no words.

Peter, naturally, was not deterred. He declares he will build shelters for the prophets right here on this mountain. It is one of those sentences that sound better inside your head than coming out of your mouth. Jesus doesn't get to answer before God in heaven interrupts: “This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!” Now, they fall down like dead people. The moment is over. Jesus touches them and says, “Get up. Don't be afraid!”

On Sunday afternoons I drive home from here exhausted, but mostly embarrassed. Embarrassed about preaching. I am embarrassed right now to tell you I'm embarrassed. Embarrassed that it takes hours and hours to write bad sermons. Embarrassed at how every single one misses the mark of telling the gospel of Christ. Misses by so far I'm embarrassed at the memory of it. I do okay at what I do, but I'm not doing what I am supposed to do. Like a surgeon who is a very skilled knitter.

So, in a twisted sort of way, it's truly comforting for me to watch Peter – who is watching Jesus in all his divinity and transcendence – open up his mouth and sound like a braying jackass. And then – this is the important part – and then, Jesus doesn't smite him! Jesus doesn't even call him “Satan” again. God yelled a little bit, true. Then Jesus just puts out his hand and says, “Get up. Don't be afraid.” Jesus knows that Peter has hardly done his worst. His worst is still weeks and weeks away, in Jerusalem, in the courtyard of a man named Caiaphas.

I pray to God I've done my worst. You? Maybe, maybe not. Either way, not until we've been and done our worst to him and to one another – which are the same thing, of course – will we even begin to glimpse or grasp the best of this faith we already claim.

We see Jesus as Jesus wants to be seen. We don't know what forgiveness is, before we realize what we've been forgiven. Our feeble hearts and minds can't hold it, so our tongues certainly can't tell it.

And I wonder if, in some way, this knowing what we do not know, that living with this knowing and not knowing, wishing we could speak the grace of God, but having no speech to say it, is the cross we bear. In my case, this wanting to and failing to preach. Jesus says that all who choose to go with him have our own cross to carry. I know, or at least thought I knew, that he means *death*. We learn to carry ourselves toward death, fearlessly. We learn to carry the knowledge of our own death in us, knowing he has taken the sting of it away. But here, Jesus does not speak of death, he speaks of life: forget your life; save your life; destroy your life; give up your life; find your life; get back your very soul.

Here, Jesus doesn't appear to want my death. Jesus wants my life. I really thought I was going to outgrow Dorky. Here I still am: dorky, tongue-tied and simple-minded, faint-hearted as my life is and, as best I can tell, Jesus wants it. Completely. A life to be borne cheerfully, resisting the urge every Sunday afternoon not to have to think about what I am doing right now. Am I making any sense at all? Is this connecting?

Some days, the notion that Jesus was both human and divine is no greater mystery to me than that I am preacher now. Both strike me as amazing. One strikes me as absurd. And yet we carry on, like Peter down the mountain, Jesus wisely suggesting to him that he not talk about the things that he'd just seen. *Not until after my resurrection*. Which surely prompted another twenty questions.

But there was not time to explain. The other nine disciples had a problem on their hands that Jesus had to fix. The story arc has shifted now. Jerusalem looms large over every scene and conversation. The cross is distant, but constantly in view – and the invitation for whoever would go with him. Our lives are what he wants, whatever we would make of them. Amazingly, the Lord, God, Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, has use of them. Far be it from a dork like me to explain it. Better that we all keep silent and answer with our lives, this day and every day to come.

Would you pray with me?