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The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

“A Movement”

My son turned 2 at the end of January and his vocabulary is just exploding recently...and so is his sass

I didn't think it would happen until he was at least 13, but he has started to master the eye roll followed by the phrase “oh, Mumma”

I and my humor might be turning into my father just as advertised in those Progressive Insurance commercials, but I didn't know the eyeroll would start so soon!

For those of us who have been hanging around churches for a while and reading the scriptures, we know that Peter, the great disciple, is the disciple who would win the award for causing the most eye rolls and “oh, Peter”-s

It's sometimes hard to imagine that Peter is the disciple who will eventually be handed the keys of heaven (Matthew 16:19) and become the great grandfather of the Western Church, along with the Apostle Paul, but in the gospels, Peter is often the foil in so many of the Jesus stories

Peter sometimes comes across as the eager school child who has an enthusiastic answer for everything even if it isn't always right

This morning's story tells of Jesus bringing Peter and two other disciples, James and John, up a mountain (not the same mountain that we've been on the past few weeks with the great sermon – in the scriptures some time has passed from that mountaintop experience to now)

Once atop *this* mountain, the most amazing thing happens – Jesus is transfigured before them: “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2)

No sooner had Jesus started glowing than Moses and Elijah appeared next to him and started speaking to Jesus

...enter Peter

“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (Matthew 17:4)

“Oh, Peter”

That’s not exactly what God says next, but it’s definitely the subtext

“suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” (Matthew 17:5)

I kind of wish God had started God’s speech from that cloud with “Oh, Peter”

Peter has this great way of seeing what is in front of him and calling it out, but missing the point

Certainly what Peter is pointing out is important – it’s not nothing that Jesus is (1) transfigured before him and (2) chatting it up with Moses and Elijah – the great grandparents of the Jewish faith

Certainly something is being said here

Audrey West, of Moravian Clergy Connections in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania writes that “When Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus, these echoes from long ago resound in the ears of the disciples (and readers). Jesus and his followers are new players in the old, old story of God’s encounters with God’s people.”¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-171-9-2>

It's no wonder Peter and the disciples are gobsmacked – or should we say “God-smacked” – by what they witness

And Peter, who is trying to make sense of what's happening and sensing the great importance of the moment basically says “whoa! Let us stop here and honor this!”

“His suggestion to build three booths, or dwelling places (skh'no” = tent),” Ms. West writes, “sounds like an attempt to capture the moment, to preserve it for safekeeping, to domesticate this wild, frightening experience into an everyday, household encounter.”

For Peter, and likely for the other two disciples, this moment right here would have been all that they needed to prove that Jesus was in fact the Messiah – this would have been the moment, when the grandparents of the church, Moses and Elijah, basically ordain and consecrate Jesus as the inheritor of the movement they started

Jesus could stay here on this mountain top almost like a sage and offer his wisdom, guidance, and sermons like he had done just previously – and Peter would tend to the three shrines he wants to make to honor the moment it was made manifest that Jesus was the son of God

“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

“oh, Peter”

Jesus' ministry doesn't stop here, Jesus' ministry goes back down the hill

Jesus didn't come to be a sage on a mountaintop for people to make pilgrimages to visit

Jesus – yes, the inheritor and, in Christian theology, the fulfillment of the tradition – came to go back down the mountain

As I read this text again this week, I was reminded of a presentation given by one of the preachers and teachers I admire most of those I have encountered, Bishop Yvette Flunder, in which she talked about the difference between the church as a monument and the church as a movement

Bishop Flunder is a UCC minister serving a parish where, when I was visiting as a seminary student back in the day, they described its theology and style of worship as “Baptamethacostal”

She is the Bishop of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries: a multi-denominational coalition of over 100 primarily African American Christian leaders and laity whose overarching goal is creating, sustaining, and celebrating community on the margin²

Bishop Flunder was the guest speaker at a clergy conference some years ago where she talked about how the church has become more of a monument than a movement and gave a sermon at the great Riverside Church in New York City on the same topic

“In the current time, is the church entrenching itself as a monument, or is the church remembering that we are and ought to be movement oriented?” Bishop Flunder asks in her sermon.

Monuments as Bishop Flunder speaks about them are and can be many different things: she talks about how denominations themselves have become more monument-like than movement-like in their hyper-focus on structures and rules and polity; churches and individual congregations can be more monument-like than movement-like when “we have always done it this way” is the expressed reason for maintaining certain practices in our

² <https://www.radicallyinclusive.org/join-us>

liturgy or church cultures; people can be more monument-like than movement-like when we wear crosses around our necks and attend church on Sunday mornings but throw up our hands in response to the needs of our neighbors

“How problematic it is,” Bishop Flunder said, “when people who are religious abdicate their responsibility and become more attuned to and connected to the monument than the fresh flowing movement of the Spirit of God.”

It seems to me that what Peter wanted to do at that mountain top was to make a monument, and what God and Jesus reminded him on that mountain top was that Jesus came to fulfill a movement

Remember how Audrey West put it: Peter wanted “to capture the moment, to preserve it for safekeeping, to domesticate this wild, frightening experience into an everyday, household encounter”

Peter wanted to put structures to the moment that would make it palatable

And Jesus came to go back down the mountain: to continue his ministry of healing and teaching in the presence of those who needed him

Jesus came to rattle the cages of the empire and release God’s people from their captivity

“God is about movement,” Bishop Flunder preached

Are we a monument congregation here at St. Bart’s or are we a movement congregation?

Are we tempted to stay on the top of that hill and marvel at the wonder of what we’ve experienced, or do we find ourselves in the valley with Jesus healing the sick, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry

Oh you know I hate false binaries, but I love Bishop Flunder's imagery

And I know which end of that spectrum I feel called to, and I know which end of that spectrum I probably feel safest in and, if I'm honest, there are some facades to the monument that is the church that I have grown to love

But let us not think that, or get confused thinking that the monument is the movement

This church, this building, is where we encounter God and in our liturgy and music – yes!

And, God is not contained only within these walls, within this liturgy, this music, this denomination

Bishop Flunder said, "We get stuck in monument thinking because monument thinking is politically correct and because movement thinking is dangerous"

The Jesus movement is dangerous – today is the last Sunday before Lent when our and Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem and ultimately the cross begins – the Jesus movement is dangerous

"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'" (Matthew 17:7)

Get up, and do not be afraid

Do not be afraid to get up and connect with "the fresh flowing movement of the Spirit of God" as Bishop Flunder calls her

Do not be afraid, in fact, let us feel emboldened to be a movement-oriented congregation and go with Jesus back down the mountain

"Get up, and do not be afraid" Jesus said

By the grace of God, amen.