
When I was about 10 years old, growing up in North Carolina – the original run of the TV show Hee Haw was on. It was a silly show with Country comedians and musicians straight from Nashville. Now, I don’t know about up here in New York but in the South, Hee Haw was very popular. I still remember some of the ridiculous songs they’d sing every week – like “Where, oh where are you tonight?” and another one that begins, “Gloom, despair, and agony on me…” I know both of those all the way through – but I’ll spare you this morning. +++ One regular segment featured comedian Archie Campbell as a barber who would tell the most ridiculous stories while he was cutting hair – like when he teamed up with Roy Clark for this good news/bad news joke: “Hey I guess you heard about my terrible misfortune.” “No, what happened?” “Yeah, my great uncle died.” “Oh that’s bad!” … “No that’s good!” “How’s come?” … “Well, when he died, he left me 50,000 dollars.” “Oh that’s good!” … “No that’s bad!” “How come?” … “When the Internal Revenue got through with it, all I had left was 25,000 dollars.” “Oh that’s bad.” … “No that’s good.” “How come?” … “Well, it was enough that I bought me an airplane and learned to fly.” “Well that’s good.” … “No that’s bad. I got a little closer and I saw a pitchfork aimed right at me.” “Well that’s bad.” … “No that’s good. I missed the pitchfork.” “Well that’s good.” … “No that’s bad.” “How come?” … “I missed the haystack too.” +++ It keeps going – but that’s probably a good place to stop… A good news/bad news story. Seems like you can’t have one without the other…

Reading our gospel lesson for today, the image of Jesus shining like the sun and his clothes a dazzling white – visited by none other than Moses and Elijah – the image is unquestionably – and overpoweringly – good. +++ But, while all that shining and power is going on, let’s step back to look around at the rest of the scene – at the trees, the stones, and even the ground – all reflecting bright white as though a flash of lightning had gotten stuck in the “on” position. And then, let’s look at the other people in the story: Peter, James, and John – the witnesses. They are as much an integral part of this narrative as Jesus himself, with the writer emphasizing their presence over and over again: Jesus led them up the high mountain with him… – the transfiguration took place right before their eyes… – Peter actually spoke to Jesus while it was happening… – their fearful reaction to the voice of God – and Jesus’ gentle touch when it was all over, bringing them back to their present moment, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” +++ Their presence is… vital – how they react… is… vital – especially Peter, who is always the one to react first when something unexpected happens. +++ For Peter, this really is the latest incident in his own good news/bad news story which has been going on since the moment he met Jesus:: Good news – Jesus called Peter to follow him. Bad news – The disciples started getting criticized by religious leaders almost immediately. +++ Good news – Jesus went to Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law. Bad news – Jesus goes to sleep in a fishing boat and a storm almost kills Peter and the other disciples. Good news – Jesus wakes up and calms the storm. +++ Good news – Jesus gives the disciples the power to cast out unclean spirits and to heal just like he does. Bad news – now, he says everyone will hate them, they’ll be persecuted, flogged in synagogues, and dragged before governors and kings. +++ Good news – Jesus walked on water and invited Peter to join him. Bad news – Peter tried to join him, but started to sink and Jesus had to save him. +++ Good news – Jesus declared that Peter is the rock that he will build his church on. Bad news – right after that he called Peter “Satan” and said he’s a stumbling block to Jesus. +++ Notice a pattern as this narrative continues:: Peter’s highs and lows are becoming more pronounced, swinging from more and more joys to more and more painful, and more personal. +++ Then… in the verses just before today’s reading, Jesus tells the disciples where their adventure together is headed: they will go to Jerusalem and Jesus will undergo great suffering, and be killed, and on the third day raised. Not only that, but the only way to become his true follower will be to take up their own crosses and follow him… And Peter is devastated – they all are… Had there ever been a low as low as this? A valley this deep? I think Peter could sense they were at the beginning of the end. +++

But now, 6 days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up this high mountain – and Peter’s deepest valley gives way to a new pinnacle of amazement and joy. So far, Peter really only knew Jesus as his friend – his mentor – and teacher. Now, Jesus… is revealed… in all his true glory, shining like the sun. +++ And there’s even more:: Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus and they begin talking with him. And of the three – only Jesus shines like the sun. +++ His Jesus – revealed to be the greatest among the greatest. +++ And, of course, being Peter, he reacts – he jumps into action – and actually tries to interrupt Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah. “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.” +++ Peter doesn’t want this to end – he wants to build little houses, or tents, for them. +++ And after everything he’s been through – can you blame him? +++ Maybe, just maybe, if he could keep this moment alive – stay here and avoid going back down the mountain to face all that “take up your cross” stuff – all the betrayal, all the plotting and scheming of the pharisees – maybe his cycle of good news/bad news – of Peaks and Valleys – will finally stop. +++ Let’s just stay on this mountain peak, basking in the glory of Jesus – and never face the ups and downs of our lives again. +++ Peter is so wrapped up with what he’s saying, God has to actually interrupt him to get a word in edgewise: “While he was still speaking, 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!’” +++ The Lord has Peter figured out. Peter isn’t in the habit of stopping to listen – to take time to piece things together – to see how the Peaks and the Valleys fit together;… they are connected – one leads to the other – and it’s the only way to get where you’re going.
There is so much still before them – still so much work, and so many sacrifices, Peter will be called to make. More than he could begin to imagine in this moment. The Peaks and Valleys will continue for him – the good news and bad news... It’s just 4 chapters later that Jesus enters Jerusalem with Peter and the others – at first triumphantly as people line the streets, waving Palm Branches – but the mood will quickly change and by the end of a week – all the things Jesus told them about – arrest, violence, crucifixion – had come to pass. That would prove to be the deepest valley – a time of grief – of fear – a time when even Peter himself would deny Jesus three times. Peaks and Valleys. The darkness of Good Friday would be overwhelmed by the light of Easter – and Peter saw it all.

His Peaks and Valleys continued, of course. The arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost... – persecution by Jewish and Roman authorities... – success in ministry... – arrests... – the unstoppable Word spreading into Gentile lands... Finally, as the time of his own death approaches Peter finds himself in another lonely valley, in Rome – where his work will finally come to an end (it’s traditionally believed he was crucified there, upside down). After everything that had happened, the whole movement seemed on the verge of collapse. Romans had a lot going on, after all, and they were easily distracted and didn’t want to be tied down to this religion. The few people who remembered everything were dying off... Our Epistle reading shows Peter defending the true faith against false teachers who dealt, not in faith, but in metaphor and myth. – ... Peter remembers that day on the mountain – which seemed like a lifetime ago – when Jesus shone like the sun – when Moses and Elijah came calling. “WE did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. We... ourselves... heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” I think this valley Peter faced in Rome is much like the valley the church faces now. We feel momentum slowing down, not really because people are hostile to our message or reject what we believe. I think it’s more because of disinterest – there’s a lot going on, after all. Also, many people who do take the time to nurture their spiritual lives a looking for freedom and acceptance – which they think they will not find within these walls. After a lifetime of Peaks and Valleys, Peter finally had the clarity and focus to know what to do. He told his story. He gave witness to what he knew to be true making sure everyone heard the simple truth that Jesus Christ is the beloved Son of God it... people that didn’t have time to bother... people who were curious but weren’t quite ready to commit... people who were cautious because they’d had been hurt by religion in the past... We have so much to learn from this great Apostle – a man who was so eager – who often reacted before thinking clearly – whom even God in heaven had to interrupt to speak – who gave full expression to the love,... the fear,... the joy..., hope..., anger..., and tenderness that bubbled up and couldn’t be contained. Peter teaches us today that Peaks and Valleys are a part of our lives of faith – not to be avoided, but to be confronted – to be lived. And, whatever else we do – missions,... fellowship among ourselves..., worship,... maintaining our facilities... :: the church will only survive if WE give witness to what WE know to be true – outside these walls – the same simple truth Peter insisted upon almost 2,000 years ago:: Jesus Christ... IS... the beloved Son of God, who redeems us,... who saves us. My friends in Christ... We all have Peaks and Valleys in our lives of faith – and how tempting it is – in those fleeting moments of clarity – those moments when you DO sense God’s presence around you when you are in tune to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life... when you actually feel Christ melting away your sins and removing them from your heart... how tempting it is... to try to freeze everything right there... to capture that moment... to stay in it... how tempting it is to build a little house and live on that mountain... to try to build a little house there for Jesus, too, so he can live there with you and your own personal savior – looking inward – isolated from the world that desperately needs you both. But then the voice of God steps in and interrupts all that – reminding you to listen! Listen to what your Lord Jesus Christ is telling you! Your work is in the Valleys! The GOOD NEWS is that Christ returns from the mountain top to the valley with you. When you fall to the ground, overcome by all that faces you, unsure of what you are meant to do or how to do it... Jesus puts his hand on your shoulder as he did to Peter, to James, and to John on that mountain Peak. “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when you look up, you see no one else remains except Jesus himself... alone... – smiling at you. This week, we will enter the season of Lent. In a few minutes we will be speaking from this mountain of Transfiguration to the valley of Ashes, remembering that is the stuff we are made from – and to ashes we will return. But now – you are ready for that Lenten Journey. Now you know just who it is that returns to the Valley by your side – it is the glorified Son of God who celebrates your Peaks. He walks with you through your Valleys and calls you to do his work – to proclaim his truth – to this world. Peaks and Valleys – Good News/Bad News – Jesus Christ is Lord of it all so “Get up... and do not be afraid.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.