

“Where Do You Keep Your Hope?”

2 Corinthians 4:1-7; Mark 9:2-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might follow and listen to your Christ, carrying our hope firmly and lightly in our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Did you know there's a place called The Container Store? I mean, of course, you probably did, but have you ever thought about that? About what it means that there's a store solely dedicated to selling not any particular kind of stuff or lots of different kinds of stuff, but just things to keep stuff in? It seems to me that there is something written indelibly into human nature – not necessarily each and every one of us, but enough of us to influence all of us – something that deeply desires to identify and categorize and **contain** everything about life. “A place for everything and everything in its place.” Some would argue that our compulsion to bring order to chaos is one of the ways we reflect God's image. It's certainly very human. And our scripture lessons today illustrate that this need for containing things has been around for a long time.

Both of these passages include references to different kinds of containers, but they pass different judgments on the appropriateness those containers. In the story of the Transfiguration, Peter and James and John are overwhelmed by the dazzling transformed appearance of Jesus on the mountaintop, accompanied momentarily by Elijah and Moses. Peter's first impulse is to build “dwellings” for all three of them.

Three, mind you, not one dwelling where they could all hang out and keep talking, but three separate dwellings, presumably like small booths where pilgrims could come worship at each of the three separate shrines. The story is very clear that this is a ridiculous idea. Mark is an understated narrator, but the line about how “he did not know what to say, for they were terrified” makes it fairly obvious that a construction project is not why Jesus brought them up the mountain. There are so many reasons why what happened on that mountaintop could not be contained, the most obvious being that it was a transitory moment. Jesus was not planning to move to the mountaintop permanently. And Elijah and Moses were just checking in, not checking out real estate. Peter’s suggestion to build them dwellings reflects one of the common weaknesses of human nature – the desire to freeze time right at the best moments and keep things the same forever. It never works. Time cannot be contained, and the glory of the transfigured Christ can’t either.

The containers mentioned in Second Corinthians, on the other hand, are an example of an appropriate way to hold our faith. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” Paul writes, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” It helps, of course, that the containers in this context are not physical structures, but us. We may clean up good for Formal February, but nonetheless, we are but clay or dust, as we will remember this coming Wednesday. Remembering we are clay is how we ensure that we keep proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord, rather than simply proclaiming ourselves. Leonard Cohen took

it a step further and said we're not just clay jars, but cracked: "There is a crack; a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." "This extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." We must not confuse the container with its contents. If we were to try to cover up our cracks, perhaps plating our clay with shiny gold, we would soon find ourselves empty.

So as we receive this lesson about containers on Transfiguration Sunday, what are we to do with it? I deeply appreciate how the designers of the lectionary place the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Lent begins each year. It seems like a blessing, an actual mountaintop experience, offered to us as something to carry with us through the coming six weeks of reflection, confession and prayer. So what shall we carry it in? God knows that we are in desperate need of sustaining hope in these difficult days. Where do you keep your hope? What will you store it in so it's there when you need it?

In the past few weeks, we have seen more and more people getting vaccines for the coronavirus. Many people have mentioned this as a sign of hope. Indeed, throughout this pandemic, many of us have placed our hope in science, knowing that it is an imperfect and long process, but one that has led to healing and life many times in the past. We have encouraged one another to trust and be patient, trying our best to make sense of very complex processes and lots of uncertainty. But we also know that science and the way its blessings are applied are riddled with the same corruptions our wider society is, resulting in racialized and economic inequities in access to all

kinds of health care, from tests to treatments to vaccines. While science may bring us hope, it is not the source of ultimate hope. Trying to use the container of science to carry our hope is like carrying a pile of hardback books in a plastic bag; it's simply not up to the job. We can trust in science and promote the benefits of science, while keeping an eye out for failures of integrity. But science doesn't address all the questions our hope needs to cover, so it can't be expected to contain it for us.

“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help,” we read in Psalm 146:3. We've had a vivid display of the wisdom of this verse this week in our life as a nation. Our political structures alone cannot enforce impartial justice or manifest righteousness. The structures are dependent upon actors within them who conduct themselves with honesty, integrity, humility, and courage. When the mechanisms for imposing accountability can be gamed and evaded by means of disingenuous technicalities, the system is proven insufficient as a container for hope. We have long known, but only reluctantly admitted that human justice is highly flawed. In these discordant days, we cannot pretend any longer that our systems of checks and balances function well because of their brilliant design. We cannot place our trust in princes. We cannot place our hope in the feeble structures of democracy or naïve ideas of the decency of human nature.

So where do you keep your hope? Peter wanted to just stay right there on the mountaintop, basking in the glory of the transfigured Christ, reveling in his proximity to the mighty prophets, offering his fisherman's carpentry skills to make the moment

permanent. But it was clear that was not the way to hold onto the hope present there. “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for,” the saying goes. Jesus is leading back down the mountain, down to where the people are, where disease and greed and corruption seem to reign. What kind of vessel can we carry our hope in, as we wander around in such a world? What does a clay jar look like in this situation? How do we know what to do, how to carry ourselves and our hope?

After such a dazzling visual display, the command from the Divine Cloud is a bit ironic. Not, “WATCH HIM!” or “FOLLOW HIM!” but “LISTEN TO HIM!” When the ears of our hearts become attuned to the Living Word of Love, that is how we construct our clay jars to carry our hope in. We must carry them carefully, for they are definitely fragile. But we cannot sit still with them, because Jesus is on the move. If we want to stay within hearing distance, we have to keep moving, carrying those clay jars, full of the hope that will sustain through the coming weeks of Lent and the remaining months of the pandemic. This is not the kind of container you can buy at a store, for the contents belong to God and do not come from us. But when we stay close to Jesus, our hope will grow in size and the containers we carry it in will grow stronger and more porous at the same time, so that hope can be shared and multiplied. This is God’s beloved; let us listen to him! Hallelujah and Amen.