



*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God who comes to us. May you reveal your glory to us today. Amen*

One morning this past week, Maeve and I got into the car to take her to school, and she asked me to put on one of her favorite playlists of musical artist Luli Pampín. I opened Spotify and then handed her my phone to locate this playlist, while I began to drive. Rather than finding Luli Pampín, she found the Spanish Christmas song playlist. With a squeal of delight, she informed me, “Mommy, it works!” You see Maeve loves Christmas songs so much, she would listen to them all year long. So, David and I had “explained” to Maeve that Christmas playlists only play at Christmastime.

She quickly scrolled to find one of her favorite songs, and soon I heard animated singing from the backseat, “A Bélen me voy. Ropo pom pom. Ropo pom pom,” over and over again the whole way to school. This is why the Christmas music channels “don’t work” past mid-January. The chorus of this song repeats over and over, “to Bethlehem, I am going” and is a story about someone who encounters a little shepherd on their way to Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The singer of the song joins in the party and upon realizing that they don’t have a gift to bring to Jesus, they will sing this song that they have practiced over and over: “Ropo pom pom. Ropo pom pom.” It’s similar to the storyline of the Little Drummer Boy in English, but musically very different with marimba-style beats, where you envision them dancing in a congo line on their way to Bethlehem.

And so here I was this week, delving into the scripture we heard today and singing in my head over and over, “A Belén, my voy. Ropo pom pom.” To Bethlehem, I am going.

We end the season of Epiphany today. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and the season of Lent begins. It seems like it was not that long ago that we were headed with that little shepherd to Bethlehem, but Now is the Time for Jesus to begin heading to Jerusalem. Soon, to Jerusalem, we will be going, and the playlist on the way will be anything but celebratory, until we arrive at Easter.

Our scripture passage, situated between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, gives us a liminal space to fall into, while we reflect and notice and consider. This Transfiguration passage is often referred to as a moment when Jesus and three of his disciples were having a mountain top experience together. Before they went up the mountain Jesus and his disciples had been talking about who the crowds think that Jesus is. Some think Jesus is Elijah; some think Jesus is John the Baptist. Still others think that Jesus is a new prophet who has come in their time. Then Jesus asks the disciples: “And you all? Who do you all say that I am?” to which Peter replies, “The Messiah of God.” Jesus then tries to teach them what being the Messiah means, which will include suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection.

Then a week later, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James with him up this mountain for the purpose of praying. Mountains were thought to be places that would bring you closer to the divine with prayer being a means to encounter and connect with God in order to gain divine insight. As Jesus was praying, as he was connecting with God, he experienced and revealed a change in himself. The appearance of his face became different, and his clothes began to shine.

Moses and Elijah appeared, and we hear that they are talking to Jesus about his exodus to Jerusalem. The disciples see the glory of Jesus and they sense that it is very good. Peter’s immediate knee jerk response is to suggest that they should set up dwelling spaces for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. They want

to remain there on that mountain top immersed in the glory of the Lord. And then, a cloud brings divine presence to surround them, and a voice speaks, “This is my Son, the One whom I have Chosen; Listen to Him!”

Can you imagine being in that space at that time? No wonder the disciples were terrified, confused, and fearful to speak to anyone about it, at least initially. This particular story is a bit apocalyptic, quite fantastical, and heavily laden with human emotions. The “exodus” to Jerusalem that was pointed to connects this story with THE exodus story, the departure from Egypt toward hoped-for freedom from oppression. But in THIS exodus story, Jesus is the one exiting, journeying toward the cross, toward suffering, death, and resurrection, in order to bring the world freedom from sin and death.

On the mountain top, the disciples are confused, befuddled, not understanding the glory of Jesus. The glory they witnessed on that mountain does not juxtapose very well with a suffering servant, one who will be humiliated and shamed by death on a cross. Sometimes mountain top experiences can bring confusion and even fear, as we try to discern what they mean.

I remember the first time I hiked up the mountain to Hogar Miguel Magone orphanage in Guatemala. Upon completing the adoption of my first son from Guatemala, our adoption agency had asked me to be their humanitarian aid coordinator for this particular orphanage. As I visited them the very first time, I was surprised by how they were nestled on the side of a steep mountain with buildings set at a variety of heights that you would walk to be climbing sometimes wide and sometimes narrow concrete paths.

At that time, this orphanage was home to about 55 boys who were mostly between 6 and 16 years old. I arrived at that mountain top orphanage with some of their most urgent needs, kitchen supplies, pajamas, and blankets. As we unloaded the bags, many of the children came to watch and to help. I noticed a particular boy who was about twelve years old who kept a bit of distance watching me closely, his eyes intense and curious. By the end of my time there, he was following me around.

Each time I returned to Guatemala, we spent a little more time together. I saw how he and his brother were cared for by the directors of the orphanage who had sacrificed worldly glory to serve these children. I saw the love and dedication of many of their caregivers, and the boys’ deep desire to be part of a family. And most of all, I saw God. I encountered God. I connected with God. And I was being changed by God. I don’t know if I appeared different to others, but I sensed I was being called by God into some big life changes that required me to let go of who I thought I was meant to be, in order to be open to the possibility of who God was calling me to be. To let go of worldly views of glory, in order to embrace God’s glory.

Big life changes can be confusing, even scary, bringing more questions than answers. Jesus shows us in this passage and in many others that in these mountain top moments, we are invited to connect with God through prayer. As we open ourselves to encounter God, the more open we will be to the changes God is calling forth within us. This journey of encountering God again and again on that literal and figurative mountain top in Guatemala transformed me, leading me to new places, including seminary, and new vocations, including the role of mother to that twelve year old boy and his brother, which have taught me even more about God and discipleship and sacrificial love.

Encounter with God brings change. In our mountain top story from scripture today, Jesus encounters

God. Now is the Time for Jesus to begin his exodus to Jerusalem, which will change everything. The disciples may not be ready for it, but change is coming for them as well. God's glory will be redefined through Jesus.

We traveled to Bethlehem to encounter the humble infant Christ. "Now is the Time" to journey with Christ to Jerusalem. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, when we will gather in solemn prayer to pause and reflect on our sins. We acknowledge our mortality with ashes; we are dust and to dust we shall return. These ashes are placed upon us using the symbol of the cross, reminding us that it is through the cross that we receive forgiveness of our sins and eternal life.

I invite you to journey with me into the mountain top experience of Lent. We will climb into Lent through prayer, expecting to encounter and connect with God. We will gather together to pray, to listen, to learn, and to sing in expectation that we will encounter God, in openness to what God is calling us to be and to do. What transformation is God bringing for you and for me and for our beloved community?

May we begin our journey to Jerusalem with Jesus.

May we encounter the living God on the way.

And may we forever be changed. Let it be so! Amen!