Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

LAST WEEKEND, MY FAMILY AND I WENT UP TO THE MOUNTAINS with my best friend of 33 years and her family. Having read this morning’s scripture lesson, I now consider this a biblical practice.

Now, if we would’ve tried to go two weekends ago, it would have been disastrous and dangerous. But last weekend, the place was transfigured; the roads were clear, and all was dazzling white with snow. And I gotta tell ya’, even the kids (all six of them) were well behaved. We came down from that mountaintop experience with hearts full.

And I’m not exactly sure what happened while we were up there, but the news cycle this week since coming down from that mountain has been more outrageous and bewildering and heartbreaking than what’s even become the norm for these days. So I’m feeling a lot like Peter who says to Jesus up on that mountaintop, “…it is good for us to be here; let’s make three dwellings” and, well, stay.

Peter doesn’t want to go back down that mountain. He can guess what awaits them: more crowds, more people who want and need Jesus; and then there’s that little matter of how the person he’s been following for the past three years keeps talking about how he will suffer and be rejected and die!

If all that awaits them at the bottom of the mountain, why not stay up top? Why not make this little vacation last longer, last forever, in fact? God knows they could use some rest.

And how about you? When’s the last time you retreated up to the mountains or down to the ocean? Could you use some rest? A break from the daily grind, from the weekly news, from the monthly bills?

Aren’t you tired? I know I am.

Friends, Lent begins this week with Ash Wednesday. And our Lenten Theme this year is “Busy: Reconnecting with an Unhurried God.”

We will explore together, through worship and through our small group Bible Studies how God invites us and commands us to rest, to slow down, to declutter our lives and our minds and to reorient ourselves to resist a culture of busy.

Once upon a time, the most common answer to the question, “How are you?” was “Fine.” Even if you weren’t really “fine,” that’s how you answered.
Today, the most common answer to the question, “How are you?” isn’t “fine” but “Busy.” Busy. We are all so busy.

One of my new favorite Instagram accounts is called “The Nap Ministry.” It’s run by Tricia Hersey who calls herself the Nap Bishop. She’s holds a divinity degree from Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and her ministry is about encouraging naps and finding rest.

She’s facilitated collective nap experiences in Atlanta and Chicago; she’s created performance art about rest, one even called “Transfiguration” which is what we call *this* Sunday in the church calendar. And her Instagram account posts quotes and reminders that we all need to rest.

She says things like, “Rest is a spiritual practice;” “Stop the glorification of busy;” and one of my favorites, “This is more than about naps. We are attempting to disrupt a toxic system that ties our worth to how much we produce.”

Friends, we are busy, and we are tired. And we need rest. This kind of rest is not about escapism, but about renewal and resistance, about radical self-care and self-love, so that we might better love God and the world. It is about reconnecting with an unhurried God.

And for the forty days of Lent, we will practice this spiritual discipline together.

Today’s scripture reading, however, is Luke’s version of the Transfiguration story. This story of how Jesus is changed and transformed atop a mountain is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels, that’s Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But only Luke’s gospel includes these lines from verse 32.

If you are able, turn your pew bibles to page 843 and please join me in reading Luke 9:32: “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

Only Luke’s version includes this little detail, and this year, Luke’s gospel is what comes up in the lectionary. “Since they had stayed awake,” because they were not sleeping, because they did not nap, they got to witness the transfiguration.

I couldn’t just ignore these words this week. They came back to me, again and again, haunting me as I tried to write the study guide for the Lenten series which is all about rest!

So, here’s the thing. We need to rest; we must rest; God insists that we rest. But we must also “stay woke.” The word “woke” as of 2017 is included in the Oxford English Dictionary. The OED describes it as, “originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice’. The Urban Dictionary, meanwhile, explains that ‘being woke means being aware… knowing what’s going on in the community (related to racism and social injustice)’.”

“Stay woke” was been revived as a phrase in recent years, but it has been part of the African American vernacular for decades. It was recorded in the N.Y. Times back in 1962 as one of the ‘phrases and words you might hear today in Harlem,’ (ibid).

So, Peter, John, and James, stayed awake, but perhaps because they walked with Jesus they also “stayed woke,” and that allowed them to witness Jesus in a new and amazing way.

Because, yes, we need rest, but we need rest, so that we can be fully awake when it matters. And yes, we need to take a break, but we need a break, so that we can more fully engaged when we come back. And yes, we need to step away from the news cycle, but we need to step away, so that we don’t get desensitized, and so that we can more fully hear what is going on in the world when step back in.

Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that “there is a time for everything, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Our lives, as God designed them, are so much more cyclical than we usually allow. As the Nap Bishop Tricia Hersey says, “It’s all connected. Sleeping helps you wake up.” Isn’t that the truth? No amount of caffeine is going to do the job that sleep can do.

Now, when I was in seminary, a wise mentor once told me this ancient Navajo Proverb: “You can’t wake a person who is pretending to be asleep.”

It’s easy enough to wake a person who is actually asleep. But if they’re pretending to sleep and choosing to ignore all that is trying to wake them, it’s just not going to happen.

I lift this up not to be negative but to be real, and so that we can be honest about the powers and principalities that we face as we work towards the transfiguration of this world.
Rest is good; staying woke is necessary. Stay awake and stay vigilant, or go to sleep and rest. But do not pretend to be asleep because there is something fundamentally not right about pretending to be asleep. It is a willful ignorance, a choice to not engage.

And as disciples of Jesus who have followed him up the mountain; we must also follow him down into the darkest valley.

There will be no vacation homes on the mountain of transfiguration. Peter, James, and John have witnessed something incredible, and they must take it down and share it with those who need it most.

Up and down; sleep and wake; rest and work; death and resurrection: that is the cycle of transformation as we witness it in the person of Jesus the Christ.

That has always been the cycle that leads to lasting change. And add to that fasting and feasting.

Before the fast that is Lent, today we feast.

We feast at the Welcome Table that no church can fence in regardless of what general conferences or denominational statements might say. We feast at the Table that invites us to rest. We feast at the Table that invites us “Stay woke.” We feast at the Table where we are transformed, so that we might transform the world.

Come and feast. Be changed and be the change, for that is the work of transfiguration. Amen.

1 https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/woke-added-dictionary-really-mean/