

Sermon – “Up a High Mountain”

Sunday, February 26, 2017

Scripture Readings: Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Today's first reading comes from the time of the Exodus. Moses has led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and they have come to the mountain where they will be given God's commandments. Hear these words from Exodus chapter 24, verses 12 through 18.

¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day [the LORD] called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Our second reading tells us of another encounter with God atop a mountain, this time with Jesus. Listen for God's word to you in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 17, the first through the ninth verses.

^{17:1} Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “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.” ⁵ 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!” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In the thin air of a high mountaintop, the threads of God's work in human history thickly swirl together. Each of our readings today is a Hollywood-type moment, the type where the special effects come out and shake us with awe, wonder, and fear. On the mountain with God. Fearful brightness, overpowering glory, and terrifying revelation. Tablets of stone from the Lord. Voices from heaven.

One of these moments is well-known from an actual Hollywood movie—Charlton Heston cowering before a fiery appearance of God in the famous film *The Ten Commandments*. The other...well, it is a strange story, the transfiguration of Jesus. So hard to know what to make of, and yet so thoroughly drawing in the foundational elements of the God story of Israel throughout all its ages, welding it together with the Messiah story that is unfolding and launching into the world before our eyes. The narrative is so weighty with symbolic connections that it begs for us to unpack and recognize them together.

First, the mountain. Throughout Hebrew scripture the mountain is literally depicted as the throne of God, and as a place where God is encountered.¹ Widespread throughout the cultures of the region was ancient tradition of the heights of mountains being seen as God places. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain here for their own Godly encounter, but they also meet Moses and Elijah, and this points us back to two of the most fundamental pieces of the Hebrew people's story.

For Moses has his own mountaintop visits with God, many centuries earlier. It starts for him when he has fled for his life, alone, from Egypt, and gone off into the wilderness with his father-in-law's flock. He arrives at a mountain and comes there upon a burning bush, from which he hears God speak. It is there that God commissions him to go back and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It is there that God promises to deliver Israel from slavery.² Later, with all Israel in tow, Moses returns to what is likely the same mountain,³ in the story we visited in our first reading. This time he goes to the top, called up by God, as we heard a few minutes ago, the glory of the Lord appears to him, and the law is given him on tablets of stone to bring to all the people.

Although it is not mentioned until several chapters later, Moses, too, is visibly changed in his mountaintop encounter. After Moses speaks with God, his face shines, and he resorts to wearing a veil when going back to the people,⁴ because...well, they get a little freaked out by that. As I presume we would, too.

The story we just heard from Matthew does not name the mountain Jesus ascends with his disciples, but the parallel is clear: up a high mountain, the glory of the Lord appears, and God provides a revelation for the people. Oddly enough, Matthew doesn't tell us of the disciples' reaction to Jesus suddenly shining like the sun. But that might just be because the story unfolds so quickly. Moses and Elijah appear abruptly. The first hearers of this story very likely would recognize in that appearance another historical connection woven into this moment, too.

¹ See, for example, themes of God's mountain presence in Exodus 3, Exodus 24 and onward, Exodus 34, Judges 5, 1 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 3, Psalm 24, Isaiah 2, Isaiah 11 ("my holy mountain"), Micah 4 and elsewhere.

² See Exodus 3.

³ It is commonly believed, although not certain, that Mt. Sinai and Mt. Horeb are (possibly different slopes of) the same mountain.

⁴ See Exodus 34:29-35.

For the prophet Elijah also had a direct encounter with God upon the very same mountain as Moses. 1 Kings tells us of a time when Elijah is fleeing for *his* life and goes into the wilderness. He travels to Mt. Horeb, sleeps in a cave, and, in a famous scene, is visited by God. “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord,” he is told, “for the Lord is about to pass by.”⁵

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out.”⁶ It is at this moment Elijah hears God’s voice speaking to him, and God gives Elijah his own command to go, overcoming his fear, and return, for he is to anoint men to be kings, and to anoint Elisha to follow him as a prophet of God.⁷

So here in this New Testament moment where Moses and Elijah appear, the law and the prophets together, the moment rings with the echoed history of Israel, all brought to this place and Jesus endowed with the weight of its legacy. If there is any question whether Jesus is the center of this moment or about his role as the one to carry the ancient promises of the Lord, God settles it: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”⁸

Even this unambiguously alludes to an earlier moment. We recall Jesus’s baptism, where a voice from heaven spoke nearly identical words: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”⁹ Here only one piece is added: the command. “[L]isten to him!” It suggests to us that this, like the baptism, is a key moment, marked by God. Indeed, this is not only a coming together of the ancient pieces of the story of Israel in law and prophets, it is in Matthew’s narrative a culmination of the revelation to Jesus’s disciples of his identity and mission.

Our Gospel reading began with the phrase: “Six days later”. “Six days later than what?” you may have wondered. Good question! Let me back up to Matthew 16, beginning with a query Jesus puts to his disciples, whom he has been leading for some time now.

[Jesus] asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”¹⁰

And then, a few verses later:

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and

⁵ 1 Kings 19:11a (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁶ 1 Kings 19:11b-13a (*NRSV*).

⁷ See the remainder of 1 Kings 19.

⁸ Matthew 17:5 (*NRSV*).

⁹ Matthew 3:17 (*NRSV*).

¹⁰ Matthew 16:13b-18 (*NRSV*).

be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”¹¹

He then tells them they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him, and that he will ultimately come with angels in glory. It is immediately after this that we come to our passage for today.

So this occurrence does not stand isolated. Jesus's disciples have caught on to who he is, he has prophesied to them about what is to come, and now, up a high mountain, God finally confirms this in a moment of glory and revelation, joining together the law and the prophets in an experience beyond the capacity of the disciples to comprehend.

The story is told in a way that draws our attention directly to the incomprehensible experience the disciples are going through. One odd thing about this account is that we are told Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus, but Matthew never tells us what they talk about. Yet we are told the presumably much less important words of Peter, as he fumbles with a response to what is going on, “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.”¹² And then in the midst of this confusion, they are struck down in fear by a voice from the heavens.

And here's where something very interesting happens.

Jesus touches them.

The fear of God is a theme throughout the Bible. It is praised as the beginning of wisdom and taught as a necessary ingredient in righteous living by Old and New Testaments alike.¹³ In fact, it seems instinctual, of one piece with our natural fears. We fear great power to which we are subject and over which we have no control. We know of the power of the laws of physics, and thus we fear the edge of the high cliff. We know of the perilous life of an ant scurrying underfoot, and thus we fear the astounding vastness of the universe above us, billions of fiery stars and forces of nature at play to which the whole human race and the earth we live on are as dust, to be swept away as nothing. And then we remember that, terrifying as it can be when we consider our tiny lives in it, all of the immensity of the cosmos is itself as nothing to the power of a God who has called it all into existence from nothing and could send it back into nothing. And that's our fear before greatness alone, before we even get into righteousness.

There, too, is fear. A God of complete, utter, undefeatable, uncompromising righteousness is terrifying. If God is perfectly, absolutely Good, then nothing which is not can remain intact. The only way we, knowing of our imperfections, can maneuver so as not to be afraid of perfect, all-powerful, unrelenting Goodness existing in the universe is to pretend it isn't really there. To pretend that the stakes aren't really that high; that God doesn't *really* mind us doing bad stuff to each other.

¹¹ Matthew 16:21b-23 (NRSV).

¹² Matthew 17:4 (NRSV).

¹³ For example, see Deuteronomy 6:2, Psalm 31:19, Psalm 112:1, Psalm 128:1, Proverbs 10:27, Proverbs 19:23, Ecclesiastes 8:12-13, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, and Luke 1:50, 1 Peter 2:17, Matthew 10:28 and its parallel in Luke 12:5, Luke 18, Revelation 11:18, and elsewhere in the New Testament.

But if God is really *completely* good, which we have to hope that God is, then God *has* to mind *every* wrong, *completely*. It *all* has to be unacceptable and removed. To be less than good in a universe ruled in the end by an Absolute Good is to be a gnat flying straight at an oncoming cement truck.

That's hard to take. Peter himself, upon his first inkling of who Jesus was, exclaims, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"¹⁴

But he doesn't.

Jesus, who teaches straightforwardly the fear of God as essential, *doesn't* go away from Peter, sinful man or not. He walks alongside him, teaches him, brings him to the point of partial understanding, carries him along giving praise, rebuke, and teaching. Jesus finally brings him up a high mountain, where God's glory is revealed in and around the Christ, and Peter falls to the ground in fear.

And Jesus touches him.

"[F]rom the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

Jesus, long teacher to them and now Son of God to them, does not leave them on the ground in terror, nor stand at a distance and command them, "Fear not." He approaches with the intimate, personal reassurance of touch.

Who is this God, then? The God of the law, whose firm goodness and justice is revealed in the commands given to Moses? The God of promise, whose word of future hope comes to the prophets, such as Elijah, in times of hopelessness? It is the God by whom these two things are fulfilled and unified, in a Messiah who approaches his oh-so-human, inadequate disciples and rests his hands upon them in loving reassurance. The booming command from heaven says, "This is my Son...Listen to him!" And then, with the power of the Almighty God, Ruler of the Universe, backing his authority—"Listen to him"—Jesus's first words are these: "Get up and do not be afraid."

Just tiny little human beings, powerless in the cosmos. "Get up." Regular, everyday sinful men, whom Jesus knows will flee and deny him. "Do not be afraid."

Can we not, perhaps, hear the same words, and feel the same touch?

We will be reminded of these today. We ordain and install elders and deacons this morning. And when we do, all those previously ordained as elders are asked to lay hands upon those from our community whom we have set apart with ruling authority in our church and those we have set apart for tasks of caring service as we pray for them. Our touch symbolizes the movement of the Spirit, demonstrates the community of faith, and passes on the reassurance of the Son of God. We echo the commission given to Moses, to Elijah, and do so in the name of the Christ who was the fulfillment of both. We remember the words of action given to Peter, James, and John. "Get up."

For we, this congregation of believers, sometimes afraid, always fallible, have tasks before us. We are a part of God's work in human history. Let us not be afraid.

¹⁴ Luke 5:8 (NRSV).