

Up the Mountain
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
February 26, 2017

Exodus 24:12-18

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.’ ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To 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. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now 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. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then 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.’ ⁵While 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!’ ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ ⁸And 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.’

We close out this period of Ordinary Time with a stunning, both literally and figuratively, reminder of Jesus’ divinity. He brilliantly transfigures before the disciples - that word, transfigures, birthed from the same prefix as transport and transpire and transcend and even transient. The shared Latin prefix means across, or through, or beyond. Though the word is not used in reference to Moses in our reading from Exodus today, he, too, undergoes *transformation* during his mountaintop experience, for he certainly does not come

out of it the same, nor do the people of Israel, for that matter. He returns beyond where he was before he followed God's invitation to come up. The same is true for Peter, James, and John, who also followed God's invitation through Christ to come up the mountain.

Not only is climbing a mountain central to their experiences but so is the experience of a cloud upon the mountain. The cloud contains God's presence. This is not a surprising understanding of God when you know that, as Professor Judy Fentress-Williams explains, "In the ancient Near East, the mountain is considered a pillar of the earth, holding the sky in place. With its head reaching toward the heavens, the mountain or high place is the bridge between earth, the realm of humans, and the heavens, the realm of the gods."¹ Now, this literary breakdown of the text is fine and good but what does it **mean**?

In the first lesson, God had something to show Moses that would forever change the way he went about being in the world directly because of his encounter with God. Moses could say definitively what God expected of the people. For the disciples, Jesus revealed something to them that would forever change their understanding of him and the way they would go about telling his story. The disciples could say definitively that Jesus was indeed God and human. Through both Moses and Jesus, God communicated to the people the ways in which God created them to be in relationship with God and with one another - Moses via the Ten Commandments, and Jesus via the parables and the teachings which began with "but I say to you" and the whole way he lived on this earth.

Of course, these sorts of encounters aren't limited to residents of the ancient Near East. We have our own encounters with God, too, don't we? Our own mountaintops, our own high places, our own thin places where we went up or in one way and came out beyond because of God. Hopefully, worship has been, at points in your lifetime, the holy ground whose contact has left you knowing you will never be the same. Hopefully, scripture has at one time or another led you up or led you in and turned you out a different person.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 437.

It doesn't only need to happen in worship or through reading the Bible, though. The modern hymn (well, 1987, so thirty years more modern than some others) *Will You Come and Follow Me* is rife with suggestions.

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown; will you let my name be known; / will you let
my life be grown in you and you in me?
Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?
Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen, / and admit to what I
mean in you and you in me?²

Sue Root, who is learning to become a spiritual director, has brought suggestions, too, to our February adult education classes.

Spiritual direction, in simplest terms, “explores a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human. Simply put, spiritual direction is helping people tell their sacred stories everyday.”³ Spiritual directors don't make the thin places appear; they are not conjurers. Instead, they help us find the thin places already around us and before us. They don't bring God to us but help us get to God. This happens in a variety of ways, one of which is listening and asking questions. Other ways are through teaching spiritual disciplines which can act like a new pair of glasses or a hearing aid; they help us better focus in on what is already around us. One discipline is reading Scripture but there are a variety of ways to do that, like *Lectio Divina* or other contemplative ways of reading the Word. Yet others are centering prayer and the related contemplative prayer, both of which Sue can tell you about.

For me, my mountaintop is sometimes down on the ground, kneeling in close to God's creation, seeing the wonder of it, like in the photos you see up on the screen. For me, my regular immersion in the scripture brings me to a high place. For me, crafting our worship is a thin place. God said to Moses “Come up to me on the mountain.” God's been

² *Glory to God* hymnal, 726.

³ <http://www.sdiworld.org/find-a-spiritual-director/what-is-spiritual-direction>

asking this of us every day, in skies to be seen, in people to be noticed, in songs to be sung, in books to be read, in art to be made but, like the parent in the grocery store candy aisle, we've tuned God out as much as a parent tunes out the half-whine/half-chant of "Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom" or "Dad, Dad, Dad, Daaaad." It's always there and so, for most of us, we've stopped noticing it. Sue will be leading one more course today to teach us other disciplines. Perhaps one of them will help **you** tune back in.

The timing of this adult education series is not accidental. As we head into Lent, a time of turning back toward God, how helpful it is to have tools in our toolbox to help us get there. We hope to help you get your tool kit stocked so you can choose which tools will best suit you for the work at hand. You are being summoned up the mountain and into the cloud. God had something to show you that will forever change the way you go about being in the world because of your encounter with God.

And as you get into Lent, in case you haven't already read the March newsletter, you should know that I gathered a few folks together for an experiment to plan for Lent around the question, "How do we take worship from something we watch to something we do?" Some themes arose and we're sharing the experiment through some additions to our Lenten worship in the hopes that you'll find worship this season to be more of something that you do than something that you watch. Our aim is that you'll find yourself connecting with God more deeply, and with God's children. Friends, won't you join me in our climb up the mountain? God is waiting for us there.

Let us pray: God, guide our way that we might find you and come away different, for your glory, we pray. Amen.