

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 23, 2020
Title: On the Mountain
Scripture: Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

Some years ago, I set out with several friends for a hike up a small well-traveled mountain. I had overestimated my abilities, and part way up the trail I had to admit that I was not going to be able to make the rest of the climb. Because the trail was so well marked and traveled, there was no real issue in me staying behind. I moved slightly off the trail and found a relatively comfortable rock and settled in for what I anticipated would be a couple of hours of waiting for my friends.

Some of you know that I typically do not go anywhere without a book or something to read in case I find myself with waiting time. But I anticipated hiking, not sitting and reading, and this was before the days of cell phones. I was sitting on the side of a mountain with nothing except my water bottle.

For the next two hours, I had an amazing mountain top – or rather mountain side – experience. I was looking out on other mountains, and despite there being other hikers coming by from time to time, I was mostly alone. At first, I enjoyed the scenery, but as time went by, I started focusing on closer things. It is surprising how much there is to see and hear when you are really quiet and in no hurry to get anywhere.

I looked in detail at leaves on the ground and even watched ants crawling across them. I saw bugs going about their work; I watched chipmunks scurry around. I could see mountains in the distance and the lake among them. I could tell when someone was approaching long before I saw them because even if they were not talking, I could hear the sound of

their feet crunching through leaves, branches moving and other sounds that alerted me to the presence of other people approaching. During that time, I prayed, I looked at parts of creation I would never have taken time to look at closely.

It was a transforming experience for me and even though it was probably about 30 years ago, it is something that is still a vivid experience for me. I think about this when I read about the prophet Elijah. He figures prominently in the history of the Jewish people, but one of his experiences has always stayed with me. It was a particularly difficult time for Elijah; he was feeling very sorry for himself and had taken shelter in a cave on the side of a mountain.ⁱ

As he waited to hear from God, there was a wind strong enough to break rocks, but he did not encounter God in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. Finally, after the fire, God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. God spoke to Elijah in the quiet of the mountain; just as God spoke to me in so many ways in the quiet and majesty of that mountain.

Mountains figure prominently in several Biblical accounts of people being transformed, having life changing experiences. In today's gospel, Jesus invites three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, to go up a high mountain with him. This was a confusing time for the disciples.

In Matthew's gospel, two very important things happened just before today's reading. Jesus had asked his disciples who people were saying that he was and then he asked them, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter spoke up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus had affirmed this and said that Peter had not discovered this on his own but that

it had been revealed to him by God. Then Jesus also told them not to tell anyone who he was.

From then on, Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He told them that he would go to Jerusalem and be killed and that three days later he would rise to life. Peter objected and Jesus scolded him and accused him of thinking like everyone else and not like God.

Matthew writes that six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain. I imagine that they were trying to figure out what was going to happen. The conversations of the previous days must have been swirling around in their heads. They must have been trying to figure out what they could do, what would happen to them if Jesus were indeed killed and did they face danger as well?

I think it was with this mindset that they went up on the mountain with Jesus and experienced the most amazing thing they had ever seen. We read that Jesus was transfigured, or completely changed – that his face glowed and his clothes were bright as light. We heard that Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Jesus.

In the Exodus reading we heard a similar account regarding Moses. Moses received the Ten Commandments and all the laws of God. Elijah was a prophet and it was believed by many that Elijah would come again and prepare the way for the Messiah. For Peter, James, and John this must have been an incredible experience. Here, they clearly had Moses the law giver and Elijah the prophet together with Jesus. This would have been a profound connection of history.

Peter is one of those people who always needs to be busy – always quick to speak, quick to act. I imagine that Peter would have had a hard time sitting on the side of a mountain for a couple of hours. When he saw

Jesus, Moses and Elijah, he had to act. He immediately offered to make three shelters, one for each of the great people in front of him. He was practicing great hospitality and he needed to do something to make sense of what was happening right in front of him.

Matthew tells us that while Peter was still speaking, still describing his plan of action, the voice of God came from the clouds saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." These are the same words that God said at Jesus' baptism according to Matthew. But This time there is something else, "Listen to him."

God is proclaiming here, that God will communicate with the disciples through Jesus. "This is my Son. Listen to him."

Matthew says, that 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.'" Until a few years ago, I hadn't noticed this; I had never really paid attention to the fact that Jesus had walked away from Moses and Elijah and had come directly to Peter, James and John. He had touched them.

On the mountain, we have a powerful vision of God's glory. We have a proclamation of who Jesus is, but we also have the simple touch of Jesus who loves his disciples, who understands their fear, and who reaches out to them in compassion and the reassuring message, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid of what? Of what they had just seen? Of what was going to happen to Jesus? Of what they would do when Jesus was killed? Of what would happen to them afterwards? Of whether they might also be killed? Of what?

I think that Jesus' statement to them, "Do not be afraid" applied to all of this. This touch is the hand of God – the promise of God's presence, no matter what is coming. Early in Matthew's gospel, an angel had appeared to Joseph to tell him that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child to be born was from God. Joseph was told that this would fulfill the prophet who said, "A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel, which means God is with us."

When the disciples opened their eyes, they saw "no one except Jesus himself alone." They saw only Jesus – the one they had been following, the one to whom they were told to listen, the one who had healed, taught, walked with them and had now touched them and told them once again that they did not need to be afraid.

As they came down the mountain, I wonder if they wanted to tell everyone what they saw, or whether they were still so stunned that they wanted only silence and time alone. Either way, Jesus settled that issue quickly by ordering them not to tell anyone until after he was raised from the dead. More confusion – this didn't change what Jesus had said about dying. And now, they were being told not to tell anyone – not even the other 9 with whom they had been traveling.

Immediately upon leaving the mountain they were plunged right back into their everyday life of people making demands upon Jesus to heal those they loved. Jesus continued to be with them teaching them, preparing them for the future.

I have often looked for those mountaintop experiences – something amazing that would help me to know that God is always with me. I have experienced some of them – but the reality is that mountaintop experiences generally don't last. The things that help us to truly know that God is

always with us are more often the culmination of many experiences that seem ordinary at the time.

They are, for most of us, the culmination of many worship services – some of which inspired us and some of which may have frustrated us. They are the culmination of numerous Bible studies or discussion groups. They are the result of many hours spent collecting or sorting food for a food pantry, reaching out to those in need, listening to a friend whose heart is breaking or who is afraid. God's presence with us in baptism, in communion, in prayer, in fellowship is what over time helps us to know with absolute certainty that God is always with us.

Sometimes those most profound and life changing experiences occur in the most difficult experiences. This week I found myself communicating with someone as we remembered that Thursday was the 17th anniversary of the Station Nightclub Fire in Warwick. It was a fire that killed almost 100 people and injured another 230, and left many, many, more changed forever. This was another of those transforming experiences for me – but it was most definitely not a mountaintop experience.

I was one of the pastors called in to provide pastoral care to the families gathered at the Crown Plaza hotel waiting for word of their loved ones. For several days, people did not know whether their son, daughter, spouse, partner, friend was alive or dead. It took some time to identify some of the patients in the hospitals and even longer to identify the bodies.

For several days, I walked among the families who felt like the living dead, reminding them to do simple things like having a drink of water or something to eat, things that felt overwhelming. We prayed with people, some of whom had never prayed before. We listened to their stories, their hopes, their fears. We brought news of hope when someone in the hospital

was identified, and we sat with people when they were told their loved ones body had been identified.

I had never experienced tragedy on such a large scale and I pray that I never do again. In many ways it was a horrible experience. However, it was also a time when we knew with absolute certainty that we were not alone and that Jesus was walking with us, holding their hands and ours, giving us words when we had none, and sitting with us when no words were needed.

This is at least part of what I think the transfiguration story says to us today. No matter what is happening, or will happen, God is with us, we do not need to face the future alone.

God comes into the world not only in a brilliant cloud of mystery or a thundering voice from heaven. But God comes to us also in a human hand laid upon a shoulder and the words, "Do not be afraid." God comes to us quietly, gently, so that we may draw near and not be afraid.

C. S. Lewis wrote a wonderful series of books called the "Chronicles of Narnia". In many ways they are an allegory of faith and life. In the book called the "Silver Chair", Aslan the lion, the "Christ figure" shares these final words, "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters."

My faith experience will be different than yours. We will all experience God's presence in different ways and in different places, but what we share is that God has come to us in Jesus. When we are afraid, Jesus places his hand on our shoulder and says, "Get up. Do not be afraid." When we open our eyes, the one we see is Jesus – our companion, our teacher, our healer, our Lord and Savior.

ⁱ | Kings 19:11-13