

Where We Meet God

by The Rev. Heather Tunney, Associate Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church

Matthew 17:1-9

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Have you ever stood at the top of a mountain? Have you ever just looked out from a mountaintop at the world around you, catching your breath and taking it all in? If you have, you probably know that the view from the mountaintop offers a unique perspective. At once you can take in both the unity and the diversity of the landscape, watching individuals move about in their different direction on arteries of rivers and streets and bridges. Maybe you've gazed at the city lights of Downtown Pittsburgh from the overlook on Mount Washington or looked down the slopes of a mountain before skiing downhill at Seven Springs or Hidden Valley. Personally, I'll never forget the view from a mountaintop in Estes Park Colorado the night before my cousin's wedding. I will never forget how far I could see – how much earth was around me and how much sky was above as shooting stars darted all around. If you've stood at the top of a mountain, you know that such a view offers us a unique perspective on ourselves and on the world around us.

Today's lectionary readings take us to the mountaintop, to a place where God's presence is about as tangible as it gets in the realm of human experience in this world. And in these texts we get to see things differently -- to view God differently. Today's passages offer us a distinctive perspective of God. On the mountaintops of these texts, human beings get to taste of God's **glory**. Through visceral encounters with God whose presence is likened to a devouring fire, a glowing light, a voice from heaven, God's chosen see God, quite literally, in a new light. Moses, Peter, James and John can boast that they have born witness to the glory of God and have experienced God's power breaking into the stories of daily human life at a new level.

In Biblical narratives, the mountaintop is a place where God makes God's agenda known. Whether God calls out to Moses through the flames of the burning bush or redeems creation on a cross on Golgotha, God's agenda is made known from mountaintops. In our OT passage for today, this mountaintop encounter will culminate in the delivering of the law to Moses – the 10 Commandments that he is to bring to the Israelites in the desert. And in our Gospel lesson, God provides a glimpse of the resurrected Jesus, identifying Jesus as the one who has come as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. On the mountaintop, God breaks into human experience with a vision of God's glory and message of God's will for creation.

But there is something that has always bothered me a little about both of these passages. I am troubled by how many people DON'T make it to the top of the mountain. In these verses from Exodus, Moses leaves everyone behind under Aaron's leadership while he and Joshua head up the mountain. But there is even a point where Moses and Joshua part ways. And in the Gospel text, I always find myself feeling a little sorry for the 9 disciples who are left behind while Jesus plays favorites and invites only Peter, James and John to view his transfigured glory. Yes, it disappoints me to see how few people in our Biblical narrative actually make it to the mountaintop to meet God.

I suppose that there is a reality check embedded in this narrative, though. The truth is that many of our encounters with God **do not** involve clouds of fire and voices from heaven. When I think back to milestones on my own faith journey I keep remembering a fall evening in the late 80s, when I attended my first youth group meeting at a friends' house. The preacher delivered a message that I have long since forgotten. But what I do remember is the impact of God's word on my life that day. I *wanted* to conform to God's will. I *wanted* to love well. I *wanted*, with fervor, to participate in Christ's mission in the world. I remember being struck by how this message made a mark on my relationship with my younger sisters. Suddenly, I did not want to fight with them or bicker over borrowing clothes or sharing the telephone. No difference of opinion seemed worth arguing about; no article of clothing worth clinging to. I

felt changed and I felt that change impacting the whole of my life, but I met God on the living room floor of Artie's house in Shadyside – not through a vision, not in a firey cloud – just on the mountaintop of a daily routine, of time in worship, and time with friends.

And reality is that even Moses and Jesus and his 3 beloved disciples all came down off the mountain too. Even when we have the proverbial mountaintop experience in our own faith journey, there is always a time when we come down from the mountain. After my living room floor encounter with God, it took about 3 days before annoyances between me and my sisters would bubble up once again. Sure, I was improved and in many ways I drew nearer to God, but life between my sisters and I went back to more or less normal in our household, much to my parents' dismay. Now, Moses managed to last in the consuming cloud on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. And the experience left him glowing – quite literally – for days after. But the glow faded. He grumbled at the Israelite's disobedience and the frustration of his task. The real difficulties of day-to-day life and of his amazing call capture him once again and become the reality within which he lives his life. And even for Jesus and the disciples, their descent from the mountain are the first steps in their journey to Jerusalem where Jesus will suffer and die, where the disciples will abandon their beloved teacher and go into hiding in an upper room.

The reality is that our lives aren't lived on the mountain. Most of our lives are spent in valleys, where perhaps we can see the mountain stretching heavenward, but we're just not there. The reality is that a lot of our time is spent, distracted from God's presence in our lives and focused on tasks. We have jobs to do and bills to pay. We have kids to feed and floors to vacuum, and too often our day-to-day lives seem mundane at best or overwhelmingly stressful at worst. And if we're really honest with ourselves, we may realize that there are times when we live like the Israelites in the desert, putting energy into the creation and worship of golden calves that we can't trust God's presence among us. In the valley, our identity often gets wrapped up in things like our net worth, our children's success or failure, our appearance, or our acceptance by

others. And there the focus of our lives may become skewed and God's presence imperceptible. In the valley, sometimes we are more aware of our own limitations, of the reality of human finitude – of despair and illness and death – that is challenging to witness God's glory in the midst of tragedy and suffering.

And so I ask, how do we encounter God in the midst of the day-to-day mundane? Where is God when we lie sick in bed, too weak to climb any mountain? Where is God when our family's needs supercede our own need for refreshment and we simply cannot spare the time or energy to climb the mountain? Where is God when we are angry with our siblings, or jealous at a friend's promotion, when we are too disgruntled to even *want* to climb the mountain? Where is God when we are too confused or disoriented to identify the next step we need to take to make the climb? How do we even find the strength to climb the mountain when the newspaper reads of mounting death tolls in Iraq, and shocking stories of kids being gunned down just a neighborhood away from where we worship together each week? **Where do we meet God then – when we need to encounter God the most?**

The good news of the Gospel is that God is with us. Always. The truth of our faith is that God's love and faithfulness are manifest in God's immanent presence in our lives, even as God's glory and transcendence is revelatory truth as well. God of the mountain is God of the valley. God of radiant glory is God of frivolous grace. The God who offers redemption in the life to come is the God who calls us and draws us to wholeness in our daily lives.

And so our passages for today do not leave us stranded, away from a God who is relegated to a throne on a holy, distant mountain. Rather today's passages offer hope. Hope that God is a God who breaks into human experience, who communicates to God's people in radical ways, who calls to us through all time. And the God who is with us in our suffering, who endured suffering as Jesus suffered on the cross, is the God of the resurrection. The transfigured image of Jesus on the mountaintop reminds us that light will overcome darkness and life will overcome death, that one day every valley will be exalted and every mountain will be made low.

Let us shift our perspective a bit today – whether we are on the top of the mountain or in the deep of the valley -- that we may catch a glimpse of God's glory in our midst today – in the routine, in the faces of those around us, and in the special meal we share together at the Communion table.

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