

3 March 2019

Mountain Stories

Deuteronomy 5:24-27; 1 Kings 19:11-13; Luke 9:28-36

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we remember the time when God the Father appeared to Christ on a mountaintop and Christ was transfigured in glory before the eyes of three disciples. We'll read that story in a bit, but there are some other stories about mountains in the Bible that provide some context. The first comes in the story of the Exodus. Moses has led the people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai. There, the top of the mountain shakes with thunder and blazes with fire to indicate God's presence. Moses goes up the mountain, receives the Ten Commandments, and delivers them to the people. Here's how the people respond.

We read Deuteronomy chapter 5, verses 24-27.

'Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. ²⁵So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. ²⁶For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? ²⁷Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it.'

It is a scary thing to face God. None of us can do so without being brought face to face with our own weakness and selfishness and mortality. So the frightened Israelites ask Moses to go up the mountain for them. They'd rather have an intermediary, thank you. God's too frightening.

Now a second mountain story, this one from 500 years later. Israel is settled in Canaan and has turned to worshiping idols, encouraged by their king, Ahab, and Queen Jezebel. Elijah, a lonely, outlawed prophet of God, has had to flee Israel for fear of his own life. He heads south, taking refuge at Mount Sinai, where Moses had met with God. There, the Lord appears to Elijah, asking him what he's doing there. Elijah tells him how wicked the world is, and how he barely escaped from it. So God responds.

We read 1 Kings 19:11-13:

¹¹[The Lord] said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

To the Israelites of the Exodus, God spoke, and they heard The Voice as an explosion of all that is frightening. To Elijah God spoke, and he heard The Voice as an echo of silence. And when God had gotten his attention, he said, "Go back down to my people, because they are still mine,

and you still have work to do.” A different kind of mountain story, this one. Last time, the people of God were afraid to go up the mountain, because God was too scary. This time, the prophet of God is afraid to go down the mountain, because the world is too scary. One last mountain story.

We read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 9, verses 28-36.

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now 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. ³³Just 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. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ ³⁶When 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.

You see why we read the two earlier stories, don’t you? Jesus takes three of his followers up a mountain, where they enter a cloud and meet – who else? – Moses and Elijah and hear The Voice and behold the Son in glory, with all his human limitation stripped away. And the poor disciples go through everything we’ve seen in the other mountain stories: on the one hand, they’re filled with terror, and on the other, they want to stay up there forever, away from the dim and dingy world below.

The people of God today face the same choices, and choose in the same ways as those before us. Some, fearful of the presence of God and the glaring light that that shines on our own pettiness and sin, prefer like the Israelites at Sinai to set up an intermediary. They find a church or a denomination or a pastor who will just tell them what to do or think, and they say, “We’ll wait here. You go talk to God, and then come back and tell us what to do.” I understand the appeal of that. We none of us want to be made uncomfortable, to be forced to do hard things, to be pushed into changing. It would be much more pleasant to have someone we trust provide us with simple, easy-to-assemble life instructions. But that doesn’t work. The largest church in the United States is the Roman Catholic Church, and millions have given that church their trust while she protected and enabled priests who molested children. The second largest Christian denomination is the Southern Baptist Convention – my own family’s Church of Origin. The SBC was trusted by millions to stand for Christ in the world, while they – as we have recently learned – protected and enabled pastors and leaders who sexually assaulted vulnerable women and children. The third largest Christian denomination in the nation is the United Methodist Church. I’ll come back to that. The point here is that we can’t worship God through an intermediary. We can’t let someone else tell us how to worship and serve God. We will be disappointed. We have to encounter God for ourselves, even if it’s scary. you cannot be faithful to a secondhand God.

Alternately, some of us are more like Elijah or Peter, wanting to hide out on the mountain, comfortable with the holy few and leery of the world. Some of us are just happier where we know the rules, where we can be with others who believe as we do, where we won't have to defend our faith or justify our faith or think about our faith. It can be comfortable to come to the mountain and quietly pull a veil closed behind us to shield us from outsiders. The world is messy, after all. There are people there who are different from us, and who make us question our own opinions and attitudes. But we can't hide in the church; it is to that messy world that The Voice has sent us. The Voice sent Elijah down from the mountain to speak for God among those who hated him, and Jesus would not let Peter set up tents to stay on the mountain. Instead, he led them back down to a frightened, angry, diseased world.

We can neither send someone else up the mountain of God for us nor stay up on the mountain once we are there. The Voice will not permit us. We must face the Lord ourselves, hear The Voice for ourselves, and then we must return to a dark world, bring that Voice with us.

So let me talk for a moment about this week. As most of you know, this past week the United Methodist Church met to discuss issues related to sexuality and to see if there was a way for us to remain a united church, given our differences. A proposal that would have permitted individual churches and conferences to follow their own understanding of God mission was rejected. Instead, the church approved a plan reaffirming United Methodists' rejection of same-sex marriage and LGBT clergy and establishing new enforcement mechanisms to make sure that churches would toe the line from now on. Those who took this stand against homosexuality (and imposed it on others) described it as holding to the Bible and refusing to conform to culture.

This congregation has chosen differently. We have a long history here of receiving, learning from, and being guided by LGBT members and leaders. Just in the past two years, we have written our own Inclusion Statement, which lists sexuality and gender identity among those things that will not matter to us in our ministry. We have not done this out of a desire to conform to culture, but because it is how we understand the life and teaching and nature of Jesus Christ, as revealed in scripture. Because our inclusion of all is based on our encounter with Christ, we do not have the option of changing our stand. We do not and will not grant any institutional body the right to tell us whom we shall love or choose as a leader.

This means that soon we may be faced with decisions to make: perhaps choosing which fragment of a splintered denomination to which to connect ourselves, perhaps something else. At this point, it's hard to tell what our options will be. We do have some time to pray and prepare. While we may not be able to depend on the United Methodist Church to have "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors," we *can* depend on the UMC to be slow and inefficient. So we have space to grieve before the next steps.

But here's what I want to say today. To our own family who are gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender I say this: you inspire me. Every time you step into a Christian church – a church that has too often ignored you and denied your very humanity – you act with courage. I honor you, and I promise this: nothing in this congregation has changed. You are family, and we both want you and need you. You are not just someone that we make room for – a ministry

project – you are partners in ministry to a broken world. To those who have sons, daughters, or friends who are gay, let me say this: I can't tell you not to give up on the United Methodist Church – I can't even say that to myself today – but I can ask you not to give up on this family of God's children, joined together by love, not rules, serving each other and our neighbors and our world in the name of Christ, who is our model and final standard. Finally, to our youth and young adults – who are incredulous that the generation that runs our denomination is trying to return to a time when one just didn't speak of such things, as if pretending something doesn't exist is the same as dealing with it – to you I say this: don't give up on Christ. Go up the mountain yourself, listen to The Voice, and do what you hear. We'll go with you.

Many of us had hoped that our denominational leaders would find a solution to our impasse. They didn't, and we were reminded again that we cannot put our trust in intermediaries. We must face God ourselves and follow the God that we have met, even if it means walking alone. And many of us had hoped to avoid all the division and unpleasantness that are coming – preferring to build tabernacles for ourselves away from strife – but that's not going to happen, either. So now we head back down the mountain, into a messy world where our only guarantee is that if we walk in love, Christ walks beside us.