

2020 02 23 – Lessons from the Mountain

Matthew 17:1-9

I am going to start today by asking you to close your eyes. If you are not comfortable closing your eyes, that's OK. Instead, just focus on some point in front of you so you are not looking at me or at your neighbour in the pew. When your eyes are ready (either closed or focussed), I want you to think of the most awe-inspiring sight you have ever seen. Think of a moment in your life when you were overcome with the wonder of what you were looking at. Go back to that moment and remember what you felt. Sit in that moment and recreate in yourself those same feelings. *(wait at least 15 seconds)*

Now I invite you to open your eyes and come back into this space. I am not going to ask you what you saw but I am curious to know how many of you were looking at something that was made or manufactured by human beings? And how many of you were marvelling at some aspect of God's creation? Now the important question: What were you feeling in that moment? *(wait for responses – amazement, fear, joy, curiosity, gratitude, humility, vulnerability, connection...)*

I want you to take those feelings with you as we try to imagine what Peter, James and John experienced on that mountain nearly 2000 years ago.

It was six days later... six days after Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be killed. Six days after Peter had rebuked him saying, "Never Rabbi! This will never happen to you!" Six days after Jesus said, "If you want to save your life, you will lose it; but if you would lose your life for my sake, you will find it." Six days after Jesus' disciples were told news that turned their lives upside down.

And now Peter, James and John are on the top of a mountain with Jesus, their teacher, their Rabbi. Our scripture reading tells us that Jesus took these three disciples up the mountain so that he could be alone with them. When you think about it, Jesus' actions are certainly not surprising. When times are stressful, when it feels like our lives are being turned upside down, the introverts among us will look for quiet and solitude, the extroverts will search for trusted friends with whom they can share their woes. So probably Jesus was hoping to use this time apart to provide comfort to his frightened and bewildered followers.

There they are on the top of a mountain, "And before their eyes, Jesus [is] transfigured – his face becomes as dazzling as the sun and his clothes as radiant as light." Jesus, who a moment before was probably wearing a dirty tunic, with smelly, dusty feet and oily hair is now transformed. His face and body glow. Imagine the energy emanating from his being. Imagine the jumble of emotions that the disciples are feeling, the awe, the wonder, the humility, the fear and the joy. Imagine.

And then to add to their wonder and amazement, Moses and Elijah appear and start talking to Jesus. Moses and Elijah – two of the most important figures in the Jewish religion: Moses, the keeper of the law, and Elijah, the father of all prophets. Three men filled with wisdom, faith and love. What were they talking about? We can only wonder. We can only imagine. Of course Peter wants this moment to last forever. Of course, he wants to honour these three men (two dead, one alive) by building each their own shelter. Wouldn't you?

But instead, a bright cloud overshadows them. Out of the cloud comes a voice which says, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests. Listen to him!” How many of your awe-inspiring experiences were not only visual but also auditory?! No wonder the disciples fall forward on the ground, overcome with fear. No wonder they end up on their knees or maybe even their bellies.

They are terrified. Imagine.

They were experiencing the transfiguration, but we have the luxury of looking back on this story, of seeing this event from a different perspective. For me, the voice from the cloud is the most comforting part of this story. You see, these words from the cloud, these words from the Holy Mystery, tell us the reason for this awe-inspiring experience. The voice from the cloud doesn't say, “This is your ruler, your all-powerful king, bow down before him, he has come to make Israel great again.” The voice from the cloud doesn't proclaim, “This is your Commander in Chief, here to tell you that you need to build an army in order to slay the Romans.” Instead the voice declares, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests. Listen to him.”

The voice from the cloud speaks of love. The voice from the cloud identifies Jesus as God's Beloved, God's emissary of love. It is in this moment that it all makes sense. It is in this moment that we realize the light in Jesus' face, the radiance of his clothing is the power of Love. This is the moment when the Essence of Love says to the world, “Behold, Behold, I Make All Things New” and I'm doing it with love. This is the moment when the Holy Mystery announces, “Jesus, my Beloved, will be showing you the way, so listen to him.” The voice doesn't say, “Go forth and conquer.” It says, “Listen. Listen

and be; allow this awe-inspiring moment to fill you, to change you, to transform your being.”

Because that’s what awe-inspiring moments do, that’s what mountain-top experiences do, that’s what God moments do. They change us. They open our eyes, our hearts and our minds to something beyond our knowing. They make us realize that we are not alone in this world and that we are only one small part of God’s creation. They make us stop long enough to experience the wonder and the power of God’s everlasting and unconditional love.

When the disciples fall to the ground in fear, “Jesus [comes] toward them and touches them, saying, ‘Get up! Don’t be afraid.’” Jesus, ever the servant-leader, comes to them. Jesus wants them to know that this is not a show of power to frighten them into submission. Jesus wants them to know that the light, the energy that they saw and felt was the power of love. Jesus wants them to know that the voice they heard was voice of their Abba God, the Essence of Love. Jesus wants them to know that they are not alone.

We are not alone. Jesus, the Christ, is with us still. God’s Beloved remains our teacher, our friend, our guide, our leader. Along with his other disciples,

Jesus invites us to go up the mountain and renew our faith.

Jesus invites us to be filled with the awe-inspiring power of love.

Jesus invites us to reflect God’s radiant love in the world.