

“Clouds of Glory”

February 14, 2021

Exodus 24: 12-18 and Mark 9: 2-9

A Sermon Preached by Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Today is what we call Transfiguration Sunday and we always recognize it on the Sunday immediately preceding Lent. It derives its name from Old and New Testament stories which are intentionally linked to proclaim to the faith community that Jesus is the new Moses. However, Jesus is more than the new Moses; he is the beloved very Son of God. While on the mountain, both Moses and Jesus’ are transfigured – their appearance changes as some kind of mystical epiphany – or revelation of God – occurs. As I read both the Old and the New Testament stories, listen for similarities and differences in the stories.

Prayer for Understanding:

Transforming Spirit, who met Moses on the mountain of God and who awakened Jesus’ disciples to the truth of who he was, awaken us here that we may discern the vision you place before us. We listen for the Word Christ has for us amidst all the other voices in our world. We dare to examine ourselves for we want to share your truth with the world. Amen.

The Exodus story: The people of Israel have been wandering around in the wilderness. While camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses climbs the mountain to receive God’s commandments.

Read Exodus 24: 12-18

The New Testament story from the gospel of Mark: We are squarely in the middle of Mark's gospel; this transfiguration story will be the hinge story for the entire narrative. Until this point in time, Jesus has been traveling in Galilee, healing, teaching, preaching as one with authority. People are beginning to ask just who this roaming preacher/faith healer is. After this story, Jesus will turn his face toward Jerusalem and the end of his ministry.

Read Mark 9: 2-9

In the mid 1990's I accepted a call to be Pastor of the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church in Hillsborough, NC. It was a delightful congregation and community, very diverse and historic. Hillsborough was once the capital of North Carolina and the church was actually established in 1816 by the grandson of John Witherspoon. John Witherspoon was a signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey. His grandson was a graduate from UNC and Princeton Seminary and married a local Hillsborough woman. He would become the organizing pastor of the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. We worshipped each Sunday in the original sanctuary with the original pews and hardwood floors.

About 2 years into my ministry there, I returned from a summer vacation to discover the congregation in an uproar. The women of the church had gathered for a movie night on the Friday night before my return. As they were leaving the church, about 10 o'clock that night, they cut off the lights on the second floor of the education building and descended the stairs to the side entrance of the church. They were descending in single file, when the woman who was in the lead, stopped dead in her tracks. Her face turned ashen and the women behind her were concerned that she was

about to faint. Quickly they supported her and got her outside to the fresh air and to sit on the stone wall at the entrance to the church. What was wrong? Was she ill? “No,” she said, “I saw a man. He was old, wearing clothes from another era. He looked me in the eye before he turned and walked through the door to the sanctuary.” The group of women began to discuss how they would search out this unwanted invader to our church. “You don’t understand, this man was different. He walked through the closed door; he seemed to be transparent and his face had a strange glow.” What she saw, as I later researched by calling the Rhine Institute affiliated with Duke University, was an apparition. This member of my congregation was in her early forties, not given to exaggeration or embellishment, stable of mind and an excellent leader in the church. What she saw that night shifted her whole world view – her understanding of reality - and as a community of faith we joined her as we also explored our own world view. The world as we knew it became multidimensional. Could there be a reality beyond what we could touch and see and hear? I discovered that this woman was not the only individual who had seen our apparition – and all the descriptions of our church apparition were exactly the same. I could share more about the story with you, but the point was that this woman had a mystical kind of experience which changed her understanding of how the world’s construct and how it revolves.

This past week I read a story about a new scientific study which has recently been released which claims to have an explanation for dark matter which may lead us to another dimension, a fifth dimension. The study seeks to understand the origin of fermion (particle) masses in space. Dark matter actually makes up about 85% of matter in the universe and we cannot see it. Scientists know it is there because of gravity. All

this information in this article teased my curiosity so I began a little research of my own. The more I read the more I realized I did not understand. Dark matter is still dark matter to me. But what it did make me realize is the magnitude of what we do not understand when it comes to reality. I suspect Peter, James and John felt that way on the day they descended from the mountain after experiencing the transfiguration of Jesus.

A survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, reports that nearly 50% of Americans have had mystical experiences. Nearly 1/3 of Americans report encounters with deceased persons and 1/5 have seen or felt the presence of ghosts. As Presbyterians, who take pride in our academic and theological expertise, we dismiss that which is emotive or not explainable. But here it is in the scripture. Two of those transformative, mystical experiences, which were not controllable or understandable - two experiences describing what occurs when the divine and the human meet in what Celtic spirituality calls "thin places". Those places where the veil between this world and the next are so sheer that it is easy to step through. The church's word for what happened to Moses and to Jesus is transfiguration.

Similarities between the two stories:

Both epiphanies/ revelations of God occur on a mountain. In the ancient near east, the mountain is considered a pillar of the earth, holding up the sky. A mountain is the place for a divine encounter. To climb a mountain in search of God is a contemplative attempt to look into the mystical world, beyond human knowing. We climb in order to gain a "big picture" view of the world below us; to climb above the mundane and ordinary to catch a glimpse of that which is breathtaking and perhaps divine.

Both Moses and Jesus begin to shine like brilliant light. I have often wondered what Jesus must have looked like. We cannot know for sure. And we cannot say how it happened. While their traveling companions watched, Moses and Jesus were changed – transfigured – and their skin became transparent and their faces shone. It was the kind of light that cannot be captured or controlled, any more than we can control or manipulate God. It can only be experienced, this glory of the Lord as the faith community began to call it, in ourselves or in another person. And maybe this shining of the glory of the Lord was a foreshadowing of the resurrection to come. It certainly was a glimpse of a dimension of reality beyond what we experience in this world.

Mystical experiences that are life changing, fearful, exhilarating, beautiful and sweet. Maybe you have had just such an experience. Where the divine and the human meet in that “thin place”. The transfiguration teaches us that we live in a world where God’s glory is possible, where light may break through at any moment. Barbara Brown Taylor says that we can choose to live in a world that is porous, full of glory doors leaking light, or a flat world where everything is exactly what it seems.

What is different between our two stories is that in Mark’s version of the transfiguration of Jesus, God declares Jesus to be not only a prophet, teacher, outstanding leader of faith, but the very Son of God, echoing the very statement of God at Jesus’ baptism. The historical and human Jesus was also the Christ of the Christian faith, divine Son of God.

What happens next for Moses and Jesus and his disciples? They are called back down from the mountain to continue their journeys – through the wilderness and to the cross. There is much work to be done on the plains of the desert wilderness and on the

road to Jerusalem. We all need moments when we can experience the glory of the Lord, but we cannot build booths to await its coming or contain the glory of the Lord. God's glory sustains us and nourishes us, illumines our paths, in order that we might descend from the mountaintop. But up on the mountain, in those moments of glory and light leaking, we discover that God is so great, so majestic, so glorious that God chooses to stoop down to earth to meet us not only on the mountains. When we have been to those mountaintops we can journey back to the plains of our lives and experience that glory, not only in the life changing events, but in the everyday moments of our lives.

A church leader shared this story about our ability to perceive God's amazing world: A man sat at the metro station in Washington DC and took a violin out of its case and began to play. It was a cold January day and he played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that thousands of people went through the metro station on their way to work. Three minutes went by before anyone even stopped to listen to the violinist. A middle aged man slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds – then hurried to meet his schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip; a woman tossed it in the open instrument case and kept walking. A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother tried to rush him, but the boy stopped to look at the violinist. Finally, the mother grabbed the child's arm and pulled him along, as he kept turning his head to take another look at the violinist. In the 45 minutes the musician played only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence

took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. The violinist – one of the best musicians in the world – was Joshua Bell. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written for the violin, with an instrument worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston and the seats averaged \$100. This is a real story. Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception and the priorities of people. The theme: How do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize talent, God’s magnificence, in an unexpected context?

My question is this: if God stoops to encounter us in unlikely places, will we recognize that Kairos moment – that connection between the divine and the human? How do we perceive the Spirit of the living God in our midst? Peter, James and John did. They wanted to build booths – lean to’s and stay put. But Jesus insists that they, and you and I, stumble back down off the mountainside, and get about the business of inviting others to perceive the spirit of the living God in their midst. The mountain top experience is never dislocated from the plain of everyday living.

On Wednesday we begin the season of Lent. I challenge you to consider how Jesus the Christ is a part of your lives. Do you perceive the beauty of his love and grace in your life? If not, what might you do to open yourself up to those “thin places”- where God stoops to embrace you. Do you recognize the living Lord in your life?