

Into the Cloud¹

Exodus 34:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9, 2 Peter 1:16-19

First Presbyterian Church

February 26, 2017

Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9

¹Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

2 Peter 1:16-19

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

¹ This sermon is largely dependent on Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon on this text "The Bright Cloud of Unknowing." It was preached on Day One March 2, 2014. I have reworked it, but the theme, structure, and many of the words are Taylor's.

¹⁹So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Sermon

The story we heard at the beginning of the service is very hard to interpret...although many have tried. It's the story of a luminously mystical encounter between God and God's Beloved Son... and of the three disciples who watch. At center stage are Jesus, Moses and Elijah. In the audience are Peter, James and John. And then, of course, there are all of us who are watching all of them by way of this story that Matthew has left us. Now, I'm guessing that most of you wonder what the heck really happened up there and what it means... and that you're sort of depending on me to tell you. Because that's what we tend to do with the Bible (especially we Presbyterians) – we take a passage of scripture... put on our thinking caps... decipher the symbols... read between the lines and somehow try to find the message that Jesus or Matthew or God wants us to have.

Well, in today's story, the most common message is that Moses stands for the Law, Elijah stands for the prophets, and Jesus, of course, is the Messiah. And that by singling Jesus out as "my Son, the Beloved," God is placing the gospel above the law and the prophets. "Listen to *him*," says the voice from the cloud. That's the most common message. But, you should know there are at least two other meanings as well - one is about how when you're in the presence of the holy, it's better to keep your mouth shut than to blurt things out like Peter does. And the other is that the purpose of such mountaintop experiences is to strengthen us for the climb back down... to reaffirm our identity... help us remember who we are... so we can walk faithfully into the valley of the shadow of death, where there is still much work to be done.

Well, for all I know, those are precisely the messages that Jesus or Matthew or God meant for us to get from the story... and over the years I have preached sermons emphasizing each one. But it's important to just admit that in our attempt to understand and explain this story, it is we who have read these meanings "into" it. The passage itself does not say any of these things. What the passage does is describe something that is so far beyond ordinary human experience, that most of us are perfectly content to just sort of hear about it from last pew. (I see you back there!)

It starts with a long climb up a windy mountain in the waning light of day. You're looking for a good place to pray and when you find it, you sit down and get right to it. It's what you came for – to pray – So you pray until your mind starts to wander... you pray until you run out of words... you pray until you start to get sleepy... you pray until it is dark enough to see LIGHT through your eyelids when there shouldn't be any light. You don't *really* want know where the light is coming from... but you kind of do... so you open your eyes and there he is: someone you thought you knew well... only now he's standing there pulsing with light... his face like a flame...

his clothes dazzling white. And, as if that weren't enough, two other people are there with him... the three of them standing in that same bright light. Who are they? No, it can't be. Moses? Elijah? Dead men come back to life... enveloped in light?

But wait! Now they're leaving... and Peter's saying something. "Tents," he's says. "We need three tents!" He thinks we're on Mt. Sinai... someone tell Peter this isn't Sinai. Then, all of a sudden there's this cloud coming in fast: covering everything up... no one can see a thing - then a voice from the cloud that lifts the hairs on the back of your neck. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." And then, it's over. The others are gone... the cloud has disappeared... and he's not shining anymore. Now what?

Well... I can honestly say that nothing so luminously mysterious has ever happened to me... but if it had, I can certainly understand why Peter, James and John were relieved when Jesus told them to keep it to themselves. Because the appearance of a supernatural light... of famous people come back from the dead... of God talking to you from inside a cloud... things like that may happen in the Bible, but talk about them at your next dinner party and you're guaranteed to get some interesting looks. No, I've never had an experience like that, but I know people that have and have lived to tell a few trusted friends... me included. They weren't all pleasant experiences... weren't always joyous or comforting or uplifting. But one thing they all said is that in addition to kind of knocking them for a loop and blowing all their circuits... their encounter with the holy called all their old certainties into question... it made them think again about what they thought they knew.

Now, that's not necessarily what you might expect from an encounter with the holy. You might expect to go into the cloud and emerge surer than ever before what you believe. You might expect to come out knowing who's who and what's what and just where you are going in your life and why. You might expect to have better answers to all the important questions. But what if you don't? What if it doesn't happen that way? What if the point of going into the cloud is not understand it and explain it, but simply to be there in it... to encounter the Presence within it... and to be forever changed? And what if the Bible is not so much a book of laws and history... of answers and certainties than it is a collection of "encounters" in which people just like you and I run into God and each other and *life* - and are never the same again? Think for a moment about all the things that people run into in the Bible: not just terrifying clouds and bushes that burn (but don't burn up), but also crazy, manipulative relatives... heartbreaking infertility... persistent enemies... deep depression... along with food dropping down from the sky on sheets... miraculous births... life-saving strangers... and dry bones that come to life. All can be encounters with the holy. And whether these "encounters" are experienced as "good" or "bad"... whether they make us happy or sad... they all have the effect of breaking people open... of rearranging what folks thought they knew for sure so there's some room for what God needs to teach them. Certainty is often a casualty in these encounters with the holy because inside the holy cloud things can shift pretty dramatically... and faith has less to do with what you think you know and more to do with staying fully present to what is happening right in front of you... without having to be certain of what it all means.

Though there's no way to really know for sure, I think Peter may have sensed that. When Jesus lit up right in front of him, he knew what he was seeing. The Bible calls it "God's glory" - and as a good Jew, Peter knew that the shining light and the thick cloud was the sure sign of God's capital P Presence. But - also as a good Jew - what Peter did NOT see was a tent of meeting (a dwelling place) like the one where Moses met with God in the wilderness. So, Peter offered to set one up - "Lord...if you wish, I will make three dwellings here... one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter may not have known what he was saying... and as it turned out no tents were needed... but his instincts were good. At least he knew that he was in the presence of The Presence. He knew that God was right there, and that tent or no tent, he was standing about as close as he was ever going to get to the only kind of meeting that really matters.

As I mentioned earlier, today is the swing Sunday between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. This is the day when those of us who follow Jesus suddenly look down at our maps and say: "Uh-oh, it's time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Bethlehem and follow him into the deep, dark wilderness of Jerusalem. No one can make you go there; of course... it's always your choice. But let me just say this... if lately you've been telling yourself that you need to head to your own mountaintop and pray, this is a really good time to do it. And if lately you've been looking for some way to shake things up... to get out of your rut... to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, you need look no further. Because this is your chance to enter a holy cloud - this is your chance - for six weeks - to put away the busyness and the distractions and all the things you use to avoid what's really important... and just take time to listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you... to encounter God's contagious glory, so that maybe a little of that shining rubs off on you.

I can't promise you that will happen; of course... there are no guarantees. But if you choose to do this, let me encourage you to take this story with you. For it's a story that tells you that in the church there are traveling companions so that no one ever has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really disorienting and uncertain and even scary before they get holy. But above all, it tells you that there is someone standing in the center of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you will never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to because he is God's beloved, and because loves you with all that he is. He is yours and you are his. Whatever comes next, he will be with you... and because of that, you are up to it. Amen.