

Sermon “The Mystery of It”
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Exodus 24: 12-18

12 The 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.’¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.¹⁴ To 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.’

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.¹⁶ The 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.¹⁷ Now 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.¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17: 1-9

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.⁴ Then 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.’⁵ While 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!’⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As 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.’

Sermon The Mystery of It

Six days later. Six days later than what?

In Matthew's gospel, six days before Jesus had asked Peter, James and John to come up the mountain with him, he had been with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi. There Jesus had asked his disciples who people said he was and then who they say he is. Peter had responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus had told Peter that he was blessed because that was not something Peter would have realized on his own, but that God, "my Father in heaven," had revealed it to him. And Jesus "sternly ordered" the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Then Jesus had gone on to predict his death. Jesus had told the disciples that he would be going to Jerusalem; that he would suffer greatly at the hands of religious authorities, be killed, and then rise from the dead. That was when Peter had rebuked Jesus saying, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you." And in turn, Jesus had rebuked Peter saying, "get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind, not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus went on to tell his friends that his followers would need to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.

Jesus had just shared some amazing and heart-wrenching news with his friends – his identity as the Messiah and his upcoming suffering and death. I don't know if they would even have heard or understood that Jesus said he would rise again. After all, Peter had told Jesus that his suffering and death should never happen.

I imagine the disciples' heads would have been spinning. I imagine that over the following six days, while they may have done ordinary things, the extraordinary words of Jesus would have echoed in their heads. From being told that Jesus Messiah, but not to tell anyone, to being told of his approaching suffering and death, which I don't imagine they would want to tell anyone, there was a lot to grasp.

So we get to this morning's reading, six days later. Jesus asks Peter, James and John to come up the mountain with him. There Jesus is transfigured, his face is a radiant as the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. There is something

surreal about what is happening to Jesus and it becomes even more surreal as Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus.

Now, here is where Peter often gets a bad rap. He offers to make dwellings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Peter gets criticized for wanting to contain or constrain Jesus, that it's not possible to confine Jesus, or that it's not possible to hold onto this amazing moment.

But maybe, just maybe, Peter had recalled the story of Moses encounter with God on a mountain top from Exodus. Our reading from Exodus this morning reminds us that God had called Moses to go up the mountain. Then after seven days, "Now 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. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights." If Moses could be in the cloud with God for forty days, why couldn't Jesus be with Moses and Elijah for some length of time?

Jesus, in dazzling white clothes and shining like the sun, sounds similar to God's glory like a devouring fire. Jesus had invited his closest disciples to go up a mountain, to witness an amazing revelation. Jesus' appearance and the arrival of Moses and Elijah were revelation of Jesus' divinity.

In this last Sunday of Epiphany, as Jesus is transfigured and chatting with Moses and Elijah, we hear the climax of the Epiphany story which began with the wise men following that star to find an infant king, the "king of the Jews." Jesus, who has just confirmed to his friends that he is the Messiah and that he will suffer and die, is here revealed, not as a king who is going to be a military or political figure, but as divine and a continuation of the line of the great leaders of Jewish faith.

But there's more on the top of that mountain for Peter, James and John to witness. While Peter was offering to make dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, "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!' " And we hear that the disciples were overwhelmed with fear, falling to the ground.

These words, "This is my Son, the Beloved," were the same words that Jesus had heard when he came up from the waters of baptism. They are the same words Jesus heard before the Spirit led him into the wilderness for forty days- to be tempted by the devil. These words are the words that Jesus hears as he prepares

to go forth into Jerusalem and to face his death. They are words that he can recall, words that can give him strength – reminding him that he is God’s son, God’s Beloved- as he faces what lies ahead.

These words, “This is my Son, the Beloved,” affirm for the disciples the divinity of Jesus. But they were terrified. The whole thing was, must have been overwhelming and beyond comprehension. Jesus transfigured, Moses and Elijah appearing alive and speaking with their friend and teacher, the one who Peter called Messiah. And then God’s voice booms out in the midst of some cloud that had just overshadowed them.

Yet, just as we hear that the disciples were terrified, that they dropped to the ground in fear, we hear that Jesus touched them, told them to get up, and “do not be afraid.” And when the disciples looked up, it was just them and Jesus. Jesus told them not to be afraid and in his humanity, Jesus touched them.

Then they headed back down the mountain with Jesus also telling them not to share any of this with anyone “until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The disciples and Jesus left that mountaintop experience and returned to everyday lives. The disciples headed down that mountain, left to ponder this mysterious event without sharing it with anyone – again, not until Jesus had risen from the dead.

What Matthew describes on what we call Transfiguration Sunday moves us from the earthly and seemingly dreadful for the disciples to the incomprehensible and mysterious. Within the time from of a week, Matthew moves us from Jesus telling his friends of his upcoming death to their experience of his divinity. From a painful earthly reality to the surreal and amazing, within a short week, Jesus’ friends had experienced the full range of life experiences – hearing of the approaching death of their friend and seeing the mystery of Jesus’ divinity unfold.

Yet on the mountaintop, as the disciples were terrified by something they couldn’t truly understand, Jesus touched them. Jesus, who had been transfigured and radiated like the sun, the one who had been conversing with Moses and Elijah, and who had evoked God’s voice to come booming from a cloud did something very human. The one whom they were realizing was divine, or were at least shown his divinity, did something very human. Jesus touched them and told them not to be afraid. Then he and they returned to their everyday lives.

In our lives, we, like the disciples, live through a range of experiences, times of pain or fear, times of awe or amazement, and times of the ordinary happenings in our everyday lives. We have times when we hear news that we don't want to hear. Maybe we are diagnosed with a serious illness or a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness, and we experience disbelief, sadness, and fear. We may have turned to our God with questions or fear or for strength or support. Maybe we have experienced awe at a gorgeous sunrise or the view from a mountain top or great joy seeing a newborn for the first time or relief and gratitude when we received news that our friend who had undergone treatment for cancer was cancer free. And we turned to God with gratitude. Or maybe in the ordinary times of our lives, everyday responsibilities, concerns, or decisions echo over and over again in our heads. We go to God with a simple, "Help me." Throughout all of it, throughout all of life's ups and downs, God is with us. Jesus reaches out to us and says, "do not be afraid."

On this Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Lent begins, we are invited into mystery. We are invited into an amazing story of Jesus, glowing, conversing with renowned leaders of his faith, and hearing God's voice declare that Jesus is his Son, his beloved. We are invited to dwell in mystery, at least for a moment.

Then we are reminded that Jesus, God and human, touched his friends and told them not to be afraid. Then they got up. They went down that mountain together, back to their everyday activities. And Jesus – human and Divine – was with them.

As we prepare to enter Lent, a time of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, a time when we prepare for the cross and the resurrection, may we revel in the mystery of this shining moment of Jesus' divinity revealed. Let us celebrate the mystery that is Jesus, our God and fully human. But may we also recognize the mystery of God's presence around us- perhaps we feel God's presence in the friend who is helping us through a difficult time, perhaps we go to the beach and find God in the peace and quiet, perhaps we feel like God is speaking to us through the words of a poem or prayer. May we be open to finding God in our mountaintop experiences and in our ordinary lives. And may we tell others about them.

Whether we are in the midst of mountain top experiences or we are lost or struggling or experiencing something that frightens or overwhelms us, let us hear the words of Jesus to his friends – "do not be afraid." For in the midst of all of it,

Jesus, our God, is with us and loving us, no matter what. Perhaps that's the greatest mystery to recall and to celebrate - the mystery of God's unconditional, extravagant love.