

Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9

“On the mountaintop with God”

In light of the scriptures focus on mountains today, I offer you this whimsical story: –

Two men were riding a bicycle built for two when they came to a big steep hill. They puffed and panted and finally got to the top. "Boy, that was a steep hill," said the man up front.

"Yeah," agreed the other. "If I hadn't kept the brakes on all the way, we'd have rolled backwards."

After one of the first sermon I'd ever preached, long before I was in seminary, someone asked me "what do you make of the transfiguration?" ... I had no idea!!

Frankly, this incident in Jesus' earthly ministry sends many a preacher to concordances, commentaries, dictionaries, and so forth. It has been said that the transfiguration is the paradise and the despair of commentators. It is a strange, peculiar story.

This morning, I would like to invite you to let your imaginative side have full reign, to entertain the possibility – probability – that amazing, incredulous things have gone on and are still happening in the world, now that God in Christ is among us.

In biblical times, the cloud was a symbol of divine presence. We see that in our first lesson from Exodus this morning. Additionally, mountains seem to have been favourite locations to encounter or to be encountered by God. Although Exodus 24 doesn't deal with it, Moses was apparently transfigured by his encounters with God. Other passages confirm that when Moses came out of the Tent of the Tabernacle after talking with God, his face shone.

Here, Moses goes up the mountain to talk to God, where he is covered by cloud. Then, in Matthew, we have the "transfiguration" of Jesus. I picture the disciples trudging up the mountain with Jesus, perhaps thinking that they will get a better view of the world. And, in a sense, that's just what happens – although, not quite in the way that the disciples expect. On the mountain Jesus is transfigured before them, and they catch a vision, a glimpse. They hear a voice, and for one moment ordinary time ceases and they see Jesus as the long-promised Christ, the one sent from God to save them.

The transfiguration is a visionary moment. The disciples see in those moments Jesus' true nature and his *future* glorious state after death. There on the mount, Jesus meets with Moses, the supreme lawgiver of Israel; and with Elijah, the first and most notable of the prophets. It is as though these two figures are there to show that all of Israel's history has been leading up to this moment, to Jesus and his ultimate mission.

There on the mount, God speaks with Jesus. It is as though Jesus has gone to God with all his plans and intentions, seeking to know if these are God's will. And the voice answers, "You are acting as my own beloved Son should act and must act. Go on!"

Jesus' face and raiments shine with a glory beyond description as the disciples look on in wonder and fear.

In Luke's Gospel, the writer tells us that the disciples slept while Jesus went deeper into the mountain – almost slept through the transfiguration, in fact. Finally, "When they were fully



awake they saw his glory."

How sorely the world, we, need to be fully awakened. We talk about, pray that we will see Jesus, experience Jesus leading us. But, do we watch for him? Do we really expect Jesus to come and make a difference in our lives? Have we ever experienced the Christ in all His glory – transfigured – with splendour so great we could not help but be utterly changed by it? Have we paid attention, listened for the Lord's voice?

Listening isn't our generation's strong suit – and I'm not talking about any particular age group. Not many are very good at listening, because listening requires our silence and our **full** attention. Listening requires that we be fully present in the moment, to the other. People walk or drive, with cell phones [blue tooth, of course], attached. We work or sit with TVs [large screen, high def, 4K], radios, stereos playing, sometimes all at the same time. Silence, it would seem, is an enemy of sorts.

So too it is with waiting. Try to imagine it ... God called Moses to climb a mountain to meet with Him. Moses climbs, and then waits more than six days, hearing nothing. Only silence. Finally, on day seven, God speaks. Perhaps it took that long to get the full, undivided attention of Moses. Perhaps it took that long for Moses to be prepared to hear God.

Elijah, one of the others who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration waited 40 days and 40 nights before he heard God's voice. Jesus was in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil for 40 days and 40 nights before God told him what his mission would be for his ministry.

And note, in each case, the silence and the waiting were blanketed in cloud – the symbol of God's presence ... but also an indication of some considerable uncertainty.

We're not very good at living with uncertainty, either, are we? Some surprises can be fun, but for the most part, we like things scheduled, nailed down, crystal clear, ordered, predictable.

So we are to **wait** on God and God's timing. We are to listen, attentively, to be fully present. We are to embrace even the uncertainty that so often swirls around us, knowing that God's Spirit surrounds us. This is the lesson of the transfiguration.

I wonder ... Are we ready to encounter Jesus, however he may come into our lives, knowing that we may be invited to climb a mountain with him, to be given a new, perhaps disturbing, always challenging perspective on the world? Are we prepared to ascend to the heights, without putting the brakes on, knowing that we may well be transfigured, changed – knowing that he will invite us to walk with him – knowing that the journey will surely be one of love and service, sacrifice, obedience, and maybe even suffering? ...