

Feb 15 High on A Mountain

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday is a bridge between Epiphany, with its message of God breaking into the world, bringing light into the darkness, and Lent, the beginning of the journey through dark times of denial, betrayal and crucifixion, to the light of Easter. We hear the story read most every year. Jesus takes three of his inner band of disciples, Peter, James and John, with him for a time apart. We can guess that it was for some additional teaching, or a time of spiritual renewal. While they were on the mountain, Jesus' clothes were transformed and became brighter than if they had been bleached white. Then appearing with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. We are never told how the disciples know that the two other figures are these most prominent of the great pantheon of faithful followers of God. Peter responds by wishing to build three booths and then they hear the voice of God calling Jesus beloved. This is how our Epiphany season began as we looked at Jesus baptism. Then the retreat is over and they head down the mountain being told to tell no one what they had seen. There are many things we could say about this passage, many questions come to mind. Among them are: "Why was this so important to the early writers that Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded it?" Why these three disciples? Why tell no one? The list could go on and on. The thing that intrigued me as I read this story again this year was why Moses and Elijah? Did their appearance have any special significance to the early hearers of this story? Does it say anything to us? With those thoughts in mind I did some digging and found some interesting tidbits about Moses and Elijah and how they were viewed by the contemporaries of Jesus. I also believe that this story and the appearance of Elijah and Moses say some things to us as well.

To begin, let's start with the obvious. Moses was the one who received the law from God. Elijah was seen as being the greatest of the prophets. These two represented, therefore, the Law and The Prophets, or the most authoritative parts of the Hebrew Bible. As they are coming down the mountain Mark records a conversation about Elijah, and Jesus says that something greater than Elijah was happening here. So, on one level the transfiguration connects Jesus to God's laws, to the great

prophecies of God, and of the coming messiah while hinting that something even greater than this is at work.

Here is where my research gets interesting. Moses and Elijah were the only two in the Old Testament who had encountered God face to face. Moses had face to face chats with God. These intimate times causes Moses face to shine so that he had to wear a veil when he came down from the mountain. Even more, one time Moses was able to glimpse the back of God. Elijah encounters God on a mountaintop. It isn't in wind or fire but in a strange sound of sheer silence to use one of the newer translations of that event. We use to translate it as a still small voice but absolute silence is a better rendering of the text. The three disciples witnessing this event were given a level of intimacy to God that none other than these two had experienced. They, like Moses and Elijah, even got to hear the voice of God.

I think we forget that one of the great gifts of Jesus is that we too are offered close intimacy with God. Jesus used the word Abba to talk about God. It is a form in the Aramaic of a word we would translate as daddy. It is as intimate a way of describing God as can be found in the Bible and in the language of any religion. We are not always as comfortable with this kind of intimacy with God. We like a stern and aloof God. One that is a little bit distant. Think about your days in school. You were always more afraid of the principal than your teacher but you also thought you could get away with more with the principal because your teacher was with you all the time, knew you and this made it harder to misbehave. So even though Jesus invited us to have a close intimate relationship with God; even though Moses and Elijah remind us that this kind of intimacy is available to all, the church has tried to keep God aloof. From the early church structuring a faith around the priest being the go between us and God, to the Puritans who portrayed God as judgmental and angry, to extremist of today who talk about a God who hates, we are presented with the image of a God to be feared, to be kept at arm's length.

Jesus reminds you that God loves you and wants to have a close loving relationship. He used the word Abba. If your father was not the kind of person who conjures up warm snuggle time together, then pick your relative that did, whether that

be mom, or a grandparent or a favorite aunt or uncle. Jesus wants you to hold that image and realize that this is the kind of relationship God wants with you. A relationship where you feel loved, where you trust and you can say anything and know the hearer will understand. This image was presented to the three disciples on the mountain.

Secondly, some Jews believed that both of these men successfully avoided death and were taken directly into heaven. The Elijah story we are well aware of. In a whirlwind he is taken up to heaven while his disciple Elisha watches and then received a double share of his blessing. Moses, we are told, dies and is buried by God after the people cross over the river Jordan. Some believed, since a grave was not found, that he too was taken to heaven by God as a reward for faithfully leading the people of Israel out of slavery.

The presence of Moses and Elijah reminds us that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the goal of the story of God's salvation in the Law and Prophets. The God who delivered Moses and Elijah will certainly be with Jesus and his disciples. We are told that this event on the mountain happened as Jesus turned towards Jerusalem. He knew what awaited him there. These symbols of life after death meeting him on the mountain strengthen Jesus but, as I said, also will remind the disciples as they reflect on this event after the resurrection, that all of God's history with the Hebrew people was aimed at our salvation and especially Jesus promise of eternal life.

So we need to remember that we are offered life over death. This is part of the bridge that I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. Epiphany begins with the story of the coming of the wise men. It is the culminating story of the birth of Jesus. In their coming, it says that God's entry into the world is for all people. The rest of the season is a time of talking about light in darkness. We see it in Jesus' baptism and his hearing that he is God's beloved. We see it in Jesus resisting temptation. We see it in the beginning of his ministry and the calling of the disciples. Epiphany is a story of God on the move. The prophecies of the Old Testament are being fulfilled. The laws are being transformed. All points towards what will happen in Jerusalem. This time on the mountain is a reminder that, when we are going to face darkness and trouble and loss, God is with us, going before us, and offering us life. When we are facing those difficult

times we are asked to look for our own moments of light as the disciples had on the mountain. These are reminders that we will, with God's help get through this time.

We should also note that both men, like Jesus, sought to keep the people of God hopeful as they suffered the burdens of abusive political systems. We too are offered hope when we are feeling oppressed. That, in itself, could be an entire sermon as we talk about how Moses stood against Pharaoh, and Elijah against a wicked king who had led his people into worshipping idols, and how both felt they were standing alone. It continues with Jesus opposing the accommodating practices of the High Priest and leaders of Jerusalem to keep their jobs under Roman occupation instead of being faithful to God. But, we are almost out of time so maybe I will talk about this next year when this story comes around again. I would just say that this time on the mountain is also a reminder that we need to say no to societal pressures and know there is always a message of hope for us.

We all need our time on the mountain. We need those moments where we feel close to God, where we are comforted and reminded that there is a way forward beyond this moment of darkness, and we need to be faithful. Let us learn from this event and grow in faith.