

Entering the Mystery

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Transfiguration Sunday
February 3, 2008

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9
II Peter 1:16-21

Today is Mardi Gras Sunday. Carnival. (We should all be wearing our beads and acting wild.) It is a stretch for those of us who like to maintain self-control and some pretense of decorum, at least on Sunday morning.

So, instead we are looking at another date on the liturgical calendar, Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent begins. (We get to sing lots of Alleluias today since we are fasting from Alleluia for the next six weeks.)

On this day we hear once more the story of how Moses and Jesus encounter God. We remember again that God invites **us** to enter the cloud of God's presence.

The passage we heard from Exodus tells us how Moses received the 10 commandments. Moses is invited, by God, to come to the mountain. When one receives an invitation from God there is no messing around. Meeting God on the mountain is a major event. Moses puts Aaron and Hur in charge while he is gone. He doesn't know how long he might be gone or even if he will return. Moses is not setting the rules; God has done the inviting. Moses has responded. With Joshua in tow, Moses proceeds up the mountain.

It is not clear at what point Joshua lags farther behind but at some point Moses is alone on the mountain. A cloud covers the top of the mountain and for six days Moses waits. Six days, almost a week. The people had been guided through the wilderness by cloud and fire so they know these are symbols of God. But to see God now, like a fire devouring the mountaintop must have been frightening to say the least.

On the seventh day, the Sabbath, a voice is heard. God calls out to Moses. And Moses goes even farther up the mountain, entering the cloud. He was there 40 days and 40 nights, biblical shorthand for "a long time." Forty days and 40 nights, long enough that the people might have started to wonder if he was ever coming back.

"After six days" Jesus climbs a mountain taking three of his disciples with him. Unlike Joshua, Peter, James and John all make it to the top with Jesus. Suddenly Jesus is changed before their eyes, transfigured. Jesus' face shines like the sun. His clothes are radiant. Perhaps it is the way the sun is shining that

morning or maybe it's the way the whole experience reminds them of Moses. As if they aren't already in a mindset to remember Moses and his experience with God on Mt. Sinai, they suddenly see him standing there, and Elijah too. It's starting to get pretty crowded up there on the mountaintop.

It is a tremendously inspiring sight, these three leaders of the faith: healers, prophets, spokespeople for God. Peter is determined to capture the moment. A tabernacle. A dwelling place. Okay, a tent. That's what they need, a house for God and God's messengers. There could be three tents, right there on top of the mountain. They could all stay there forever, in God's presence.

Then a cloud appears that glows all the more with the brightness of Jesus and a voice speaks from the cloud saying what Jesus heard at his baptism – "This is my beloved child with whom I am well pleased." This is no idle phrase. This is what God says, in Psalm 2, when God is anointing a king. Now Jesus is receiving this blessing, anointing for kingship, the messiah.

The scene is astounding: the brightness, Elijah, Moses, Jesus radiating light, a voice from a cloud. Peter, James and John are terrified and fall to the ground. It is Jesus who says to them, as he so often does, "Don't be afraid. Get up now." It is over. It is just the four of them again, no Moses, no Elijah and no voice from a cloud.

Many people in the next few days will be trying to escape reality. It might seem easier to join the Mardi Gras and Super Bowl revelry than seek to make sense of these texts this morning. At first glance these scriptures seem to be a biblical escape from reality. But perhaps these texts are instead an invitation into a different realm, one that is unfamiliar to many of us.

We, here at Hyattsville Mennonite, are not known for being mystics. We are known for our action more than our contemplation. We are known for what some might call, a prophetic voice, more than a listening posture.

Transfiguration Sunday is **not** incompatible with who we are. It is the source of who we are – as prophetic people of action. As we look toward the next weeks of Lenten wilderness we are pointed toward the mystery of God. We are invited to seek this God that is bright as fire, as mystifying as a cloud. We are invited to ground ourselves and our faith in the mystery of God – just as Moses and Jesus and Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa did.

We who are rational and educated probably have a hard time entering the cloud of God's presence. It seems nonsensical and illogical. Not something reasonable people do.

Why should we ground ourselves in something as irrational as mystery? With biology, geology, physics, history and plenty of other disciplines to help us

understand the world, why should we turn to something as primitive as images of clouds and fire? What earthly use is mystery? Why should we let go of what we know and enter what we do not know?

Why? Because this is part of what it means to be fully human. To seek what is beyond ourselves, beyond what we understand. This is part of our task as curious humans. What may feel foreign or more difficult is to stop seeking. Stop thinking. Stop figuring. Stop calculating. Stop.

And then marvel. And wonder.

Let the sights and sounds and smells come over you.

Become alert. Become alive to what is around you.

Did 40 days just pass? Or was it just a moment?

Why should we attempt to approach mystery? Because we are human and mystery gets us in touch with the divine, with something beyond ourselves and our present experience. And besides, we are invited.

This invitation does not come with a simple RSVP. Finding God in cloud or fire involves time. Moses waited six days on the mountain and then God spoke. Jesus and his friends went up to the mountain after six days. There must be something about Sabbath and seeking the cloud.

To seek the mysterious presence of God may take not just time, but actual exertion of the body. It can be as difficult as climbing the face of a rock or riding bike across the country. Those of you who run or rock climb, play basketball or ski can attest to the possibilities of meeting God in rigorous activity.

On the other hand, seeking the mystery of God might be easy as sitting quietly in the dark and breathing deeply. It might be as simple as listening for birds on an unusually warm day in February.

The beauty of the invitation from God is that it is not a one-size-fits-all kind of party. We see the mountain top experience of Moses but that does not mean that we who are women are not invited. We see the mountain top experience of the adult Jesus but that does not mean that children do not have significant encounters with God. And these stories don't mean we only meet God on mountains.

To enter into the presence of God, into the mysterious and unexplainable, is so intimate and so unusual that we often don't know how to speak of it. We aren't even sure if we should speak of it since so much of what passes for God seem hokey and contrived. Some preachers and evangelists are so concerned

with saving souls that sometimes their followers fake the fire, so to speak. But just because some people have taken advantage of God in this way doesn't mean that we have to discount it and throw it all away.

I know the excuses. I use them all myself. If you haven't heard your own excuse yet, here is another. It is selfish to take this much time even if it is about God. Because let's face it, we are talking about carving out another piece of time that isn't really there in our lives. But this time benefits not only the self. Time spent with God individually enriches the lives of people we encounter and it deepens our life when we gather as a community.

It is out of these mysterious God experiences that we base our prophetic speech and action. The passage from II Peter recounts Peter's experience of being on the mountaintop. Peter is clear that in order to be prophetic, to truly speak and act for God, we must enter the cloud of presence. We must be in tune with God. Women and men of God listen for God and out of that experience they are empowered to do God's work. We have gone full circle, we are back to action.

Prophetic action comes not only from what we have experienced in our body through sight and sound and smell but what we have experienced outside the body. Somehow the experience with God is in the body but transcends it at the same time. No wonder we call it mystery. It makes no sense. Usually when we talk about mystery it is something to be solved. But in this case it is something to enter and experience not a case to crack.

As we approach Lent this year, I invite you to consider the cloud, the fire. If it seems overwhelming, start with small steps up the mountain:

14 slow deep breaths
a minute of silence with others before a meal
a walk around the block – to listen
one minute of awareness or gratefulness at a stop light or on the metro
three minutes a day sitting in silence

What might we learn about God as we enter the mystery? What might we learn about ourselves? What new possibilities might we see in our gathered community? Where might we see God at work in the world?

May the God of Moses and Jesus, the God like cloud and fire, the God in mystery and light, guide us on this mountainous trek.