

Transfiguration Sunday (February 26, 2023) Text: Matthew 17:1-11

“With Jesus: On the Mountaintop”

The story that we have just heard really does defy interpretation, although that has not stopped legions of interpreters from trying. It is the luminous story of a mystical encounter, not only between God and God’s Beloved but also between those at the center of the story and those who watch. Those at the center are Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Those who watch are Peter, James, and John. And then, of course, there are all of us watching all of them, most of us laboring under the illusion that our job is to figure out what the story means.

I am not sure where we got this idea, but it seems to dominate the way that many of us read the Bible. Give us a passage of scripture and we will put on our thinking caps, doing our best to decipher the symbols, read between the lines and come up with the encoded message that Jesus or Luke or God has hidden in the passage for us to find.

The idea seems to be that the story itself is chiefly a suitcase for conveying the meaning inside of it. Discern the content of the story and you do not have to go rummaging around inside of it every time it comes up. Instead, you can pull the meaning out of it and place it neatly folded in a drawer where you can find it the next time you need it.

In the present case, the most common decoded message is that Moses stands for the Law, Elijah stands for the prophets, and Jesus, of course, is the Messiah. By singling Jesus out as ***“my Son, the Beloved,”*** God sets the gospel over the law and the prophets. ***“Listen to Him,”*** says the voice from the cloud.

There are two auxiliary meanings as well — One is about how it is better to keep your mouth shut in the presence of the holy than to blurt things out like Peter does; the other about how the purpose of such mountaintop experiences is to strengthen us for the climb back down into the valley of the shadow of death, where our real work remains to be done.

For all I know, those are exactly the meanings that Jesus or Luke or God

meant for us to get from the story; but it's important to note that the passage itself does not say any of those things. Instead, it describes something so beyond ordinary human experience that most of us are perfectly content to watch it from at least this far away.

It starts with a long climb up a windy mountain in the fading light of day, hunting for a strong place to pray. No talking for once. No wall of words between you and the others. Just breathing for once, just hearing them breathe, until you can't tell whether you are breathing or being breathed. Are you hyperventilating?

Sit down. You are here to pray, so get on with it. Pray until you are weighed down with sleep. Pray until it is dark enough to see light through your eyelids where light should not be. You don't really want to open your eyes to see where the light is coming from. But you kind of do. But you don't. Then you look.

And there he is: someone you thought you knew really well, standing there pulsing with light, leaking light everywhere. Face like a flame. Clothes dazzling white. Then, as if that weren't enough, two other people are there with Him, all of them standing in that same bright light. Who are they? Can't be. Moses. Elijah. Dead men come back to life. God's own glory, lighting up the night. Now they're leaving.

Now Peter's saying something. Tents, he's saying. We need tents. He thinks we're on Sinai. Someone tell him we're not on Sinai. Now there's a cloud coming in fast that is way more than weather, a terrifying cloud that is also alive. Cutting Peter off. Covering everything up. Smells like a lightning strike. Can't see a thing.

Then a voice from the cloud lifts the hairs on the back of your neck. Fear so fast and primitive, you're bristling like a dog. What's the voice saying? Not, "*Listen to me!*" but "***Listen to Him***" The Son, the Beloved. But listen to what? He's not saying anything. He's just shining.

Or at least He was. Now He's not. Now it's over. Now what?

If anything even remotely that strange has ever happened to you, then you know why Peter, James and John were relieved when Jesus told them to keep what had happened to themselves. Supernatural light. Famous people come back from the dead. God talking to you from inside a cloud. Things like that may happen in the Bible, but try talking about them now and someone's going to give you the name of a good psychiatrist.

If you have to say anything at all, then you're better off sticking with the Bible commentaries. Just say the thing about Jesus surpassing the law and the prophets, poke a little fun at Peter, bury the rest. It might have been God. Then, again, it might have been last night's Thai food.

Most of us are allowed at least one direct experience of God (within bounds) — something that knocks us for a loop, blows our circuits, calls all our old certainties into question. Some churches even require you to produce one such experience as proof of your conversion. But even in congregations that welcome signs and wonders on a regular basis, there seems to be a general consensus that life in Christ means trading in your old certainties for new ones.

Once you emerge from the cloud, you are supposed to be surer than ever what you believe. You are supposed to know who's who, what's what, where you are going in your life and why. You are supposed to have answers to all the important questions, and when you read the Bible you are supposed to know what it means. You have your Christian decoder ring, now use it!

But what if the point is not to decode the cloud but simply to enter into it? What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, life — and are never the same again?

I mean, what don't people run into in the Bible? Not just terrifying clouds and hair-raising voices but also crazy relatives, persistent infertility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and knee-wobbling

love.

Whether such biblical encounters come disguised as “good” or “bad,” they have a way of breaking biblical people open, of rearranging what they think they know for sure so that there is room for more divine movement in their lives. Sometimes the movement involves traveling from one place to another. Sometimes it means changing their angle on what is true and why. Sometimes it involves the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another.

Certainties can become casualties in these encounters, or at least those certainties that involve clinging to static notions of who’s who and what’s what, where you are going in your life and why. Those things can shift pretty dramatically inside the cloud of unknowing, where faith has more to do with staying fully present to what is happening right in front of you than with being certain of what it all means. The encounter — that’s the thing!

There is no way for me to be sure, but I think Peter sensed that. When Jesus lit up right in front of him, Peter knew what he was seeing. The Bible calls it “God’s glory” — the shining cloud that is the sure sign of God’s “capital P” Presence, known in Hebrew as *shekinah*.

In the Book of Exodus, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai to fetch the tablets of the law, the whole top of the mountain stayed socked in divine cloud cover for six whole days. In 1 Kings, when Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, a dense cloud filled up that huge place so that the priests could not even see what they were supposed to be doing. When Ezekiel had his vision of the four living creatures, he saw them in the middle of ***“a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually.”***

That’s what God’s glory looks like, apparently: a big bright cloud — dark and dazzling at the same time — an envelope for the Divine Presence that would blow people away if they looked upon it directly — so God in God’s mercy placed a cloud buffer around it, which both protected the

people and made it difficult for them to see inside. Before the cloud rolled in, Peter kind of knew what he was seeing.

What he did not see was a tent of meeting, a dwelling place, like the one where Moses frequently met with God during the wilderness years. So Peter offered to set one up — one for each of the great ones who appeared in glory before him: ***“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.”***

Peter may not have known what he was saying, but his instincts were good. 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 as close as he was ever going to get to the only kind of meeting that really matters.

For those of us who keep the Christian calendar along with the one that says this Sunday is February 26, we know this is the swing Sunday between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent — the day those who follow Jesus look down at our maps and say, *“Uh-oh,”* because it is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent. As gloomy as that may sound, it is very good news.

Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness may be just what we need. No one can make you go, after all. But if you’ve been looking for some excuse to head to your own mountaintop and pray, this is it. If you’ve been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further.

This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you. Tent or no tent, this is your chance to encounter God’s contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you.

Today you have heard a story that you can take with you when you go.

It tells you that no one has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really scary before they get holy. Above all, it tells you that you are with Jesus — there is someone standing in the center of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you may never be able to wrap your mind around Him, but who is worth listening to all the same — because He is God’s beloved, and you are His, and whatever comes next, you are up to it.

“And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.” That’s the vision we want, or at least want to want, as well.

As we walk with Jesus along the path to Golgotha this Lent, we need to keep looking to Him, at Him and for Him. To Him for all that we need; at Him for inspiration; for Him to come and be fully present with us.

We should desire to have such a profound sense of the presence of the Lord in every moment, that all we see, all we want to see, is Jesus.

Amen.