

Super Sunday

Transfiguration Sunday

19 February 2023

Exodus 24:12-18, 1 Kings 19, & Matthew 17:1-9

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It's Super Sunday! Please, do not be confused. Last Sunday the NFL played their final game of the 2022-23 season, Super Bowl Sunday. I even know that the words "Super Bowl Sunday" are so copyrighted that I can't say them aloud in the YouTube version of this sermon. I am not confused, and I hope by the end of today's message you are not confused either.

This week, we celebrate a holy day in the life of the Christ. As holy days go, Transfiguration Sunday is less important than either Easter or Christmas, but still so important that Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe it in their Gospels while both Peter and John refer to their experience that day in their letters to the Church. So why did these New Testament writers think remembering this day is so important?

This holy day reminds us of the moment when Jesus first revealed he was God to his disciples. He invited three of them to come with him on one of his regular prayer retreats on a mountain. So far, nothing out of the ordinary for a rabbi to invite deeply engaged followers on a prayer retreat.

But at the top of that mountain Peter, James and John found themselves living in Scripture they had studied at synagogue. At the summit, Moses and Elijah joined Jesus. Both Elijah and Moses have memorable Old Testament stories of time on a mountain alone with God. Elijah sought God on a mountain when the wicked queen, Jezebel, was persecuting him and he needed to listen for God's guidance. Moses was invited by God to climb Mt. Horeb so God could give him the Ten Commandments carved on tablets of stone. Moses' experience is told in Exodus 24, our Old Testament passage for this week.

We can see all these events in our imaginations. We have seen them in art ranging from Hollywood movies to this week's bulletin covers. But can we see it as clearly as the first generation of church did? Perhaps. One helpful way to see this

story about Jesus Christ more clearly is to contrast his invitation to Peter, James, and John to join him on a prayer hike with God's invitation for Moses to meet with him. Both happen on a mountain, their key similarity. But what are the contrasts?

Contrast is taught in middle schools' general curriculum as a key component of color theory in art class. Color contrast is used by the makers of every logo you read. The NFL uses contrast in every football game by putting one team in uniforms of their designated contrasting colors while the other plays in their team's "whites." Everyone watching the game last Sunday knew which players belonged to which team because the NFL always uses contrast to help referees and fans know who is whom.

For sanctuary worship, we use contrast when we produce worship bulletins. Without contrast, the bulletin is hard to see. We choose black and white art that supports our sermon theme; the art at 10:30 even thinks about how a listening person of any age may choose to color it in. The art is printed with the highest visual contrast, black ink on white paper. We never use red paper because black ink on red paper is low contrast and even folks who think they have no vision problems have a hard time seeing the cover art or reading along with our shared prayers. (In the sanctuary and recorded services, we printed a bulletin on red paper to demonstrate.)

What are some contrasts between Moses and Jesus in our two Bible readings for today?

First, Jesus is the host and Moses is the guest. In Moses' story, God invites Moses to the mountain. In Jesus' story, he invites Peter, James, and John to travel with him. Or in NFL lingo, God and Jesus are the home team while Moses, Peter, James, and John are the visiting team. Jesus is equal to God. Moses is equal to the disciples. As we imagine we are there, we are equal to Moses, Peter, James, and John.

Second, throughout Christian scripture, Moses is called the servant of God while Jesus is called the Son of God. (This differentiates Christians from Jews and Muslims.) Even today there are big differences between being a person's servant and being their son. Speaking as a retired waitress now called to preach, while I do love my regular food servers, I don't love them with the deep love I have for my children. Nor do my regular servers need to listen to me and care for me the way my children do. As God's son, Jesus had privileges and responsibilities that Moses did not.

Finally let's widen our lens to include all we know about Moses and Jesus.

Even though Moses had exemplary faith he was still just a sinner saved by grace. Raised in Pharaoh's courts Moses murdered a man, and fled to the wilderness

where he worked as a shepherd. There God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him to return to Egypt to lead God's people to freedom in their Promised Land. But along the way, Moses let his pride get in the way of listening for how God wanted him to lead and endured the consequence of knowing he would never enter the Promised Land himself. Moses was as fully human and in need of grace as you and I are.

Jesus was without sin. He was God's son, raised by human parents in a fishing village with no frills. Before it was time for his preaching ministry, Jesus was a carpenter. When his opponents were tempted to stop Jesus' message, they couldn't. Not even death could stop Jesus Christ's mission to bring us forgiveness and grace.

Jesus invited his followers to join him in prayer. In prayer he revealed his true self—fully human and fully divine. And our Creator, Jesus' father, arrived as well in a cloud just like the one he arrived in for his mountain top meeting with Moses. There Peter, James, and John heard God speak. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

What does this mean in our living as we seek to know Christ?

We have an invitation to walk with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There may be, or perhaps I should say there will be, times when God will join you in a way where you are aware of divine presence. While Moses, Peter, James, and John were invited, we should also remember that Elijah had his mountain top experience with God because he chose to go to a mountain and listen.

Elijah . . . arrived at Horeb, God's mountain. There he went into a cave and spent the night. The Lord's word came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah? . . . Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by." A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the Lord. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave's- entrance. A voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19: 8-9, 11-13, Common English Bible, 2011).

In January, Elijah's time on a mountain with God was my Scripture while I was away from you. When I was younger, I was baffled because some of the pastors I respected most deeply did not go to church when they were on vacation. One shared

that he could not even open a Bible without mentally beginning a sermon. That sounded odd to my younger self. But after our three shared years with COVID, I needed a retreat. And like my dear colleague I found could not open even the hotel's Gideon Bible, but this Scripture I knew well was with me often—just as the Scripture they knew was for Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John every day.

I went to Santa Fe, New Mexico. My oldest son lives there and my intent was to spend time with him in his everyday life. His intent was for me to help him resume sewing his own work shirts; he's now a big man and I was his 4-H sewing project leader. We had a great time.

But Santa Fe is also a holy place. From the little Spanish my friends have taught me, I already knew "Santa Fe" means "Holy Faith" in English. At their airport a brass plaque taught me that the full name of Santa Fe is La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís; or in English "The Royal Town of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis of Assisi." The mountains surrounding Santa Fe form a basin named Sangre de Cristo: the Blood of Christ. The Franciscan missionaries who first brought Christ's message to that place saw the Chalice for Holy Communion its geography.

My vacation took me to a place surrounded by mountains where serving my son's need, prayer, and memorized Scripture were my means of grace.¹ Just like Elijah, who knew Moses' story and then joined Christ's revelation to Peter, James, and John. Like them, I heard the word God needed me to hear. I am so thankful I accepted God's invitation to listen.

Today, accept God's invitation to listen. Next week's forecast (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, February 21 to 23) is for a snowstorm with twelve plus inches of snow and strong winds. We hope there is no earthquake or fire, but the possibility is always with us. We may find ourselves suddenly without our personal Bibles, but the Scripture stored in our hearts will never leave us. So, let's make our snowstorm our shared retreat with Christ. During the snowstorm while the wind blows, leave you Bible closed and consider the Scripture you know by heart. Sit with Christ and consider that passage as our season of Lent begins in a snowstorm.

Christ will be there. What will he help you see?

Amen.

¹ Per John Wesley the means of grace are made up of acts of service, here helping my son remember how to sew, and acts of piety, prayer and reflecting on the Scripture.