



“LEAVING AND BELIEVING”
SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 24: 12-18; MATTHEW 17: 1-9
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
February 23, 2020

Exodus 24:12-18

24:12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."

24:13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.

24:14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

24:15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

24:16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.

24:17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

24:18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 17:1-9

17:1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

17:2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

17:3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

17:4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "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."

17:5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

17:6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

17:7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

17:8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

17:9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A Poem by Rainer Maria Rilke:

No one lives his life.
Disguised since childhood,
haphazardly assembled
from voices and fears and little pleasures,
we come of age as masks.
Our true face never speaks.

Somewhere there must be storehouses
where all these lives are laid away
like suits of armor or old carriages
or clothes hanging limply on the walls.
Maybe all the paths lead there,
to the repository of unlived things.

And yet, though we strain
against the deadening grip
of daily necessity,
I sense there is this mystery:

All life is being lived.

Who is living it, then?
Is it the thing in themselves,
or something waiting inside them,
like an unplayed melody in a flute?

Is it the winds blowing over the waters?
Is it the branches that signal to each other?

Is it flowers
interweaving their fragrances,
or streets, as they wind through time?

Is it the animals, warmly moving,
or the birds, that suddenly rise up?

Who lives it, then? God, are you the one
who is living life?¹

If we are to sit with transfiguration, then we must touch into something that far exceeds our imaginations—and simultaneously risk being fully present there.

It might sound like a contradiction—something beyond our imagination and something we can be fully present in and with—that both/and space, that both/and impossible and immediate space—well that is the life of faith.

The ancestors of our faith gave us these stories, these touchstones of mystery and the mundane to tell us who we are. We live simultaneously with every breath in the necessity of the present moment and in the mystery of eternity.

It is no coincidence that the rhythm of our church year invites us to glimpse these two mountain tops just a few days before we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The transfiguration takes us into Lent—the transforming mystery of God’s intimacy with the world is what we take with us into the wilderness wanderings, into our deepest questions, into our shadows, our deserts, our how long, O Lord, moments.

Mystery and the mundane are not separate worlds, but the same world. Faith is the capacity to be there, to be here believing that to be true.

Holy moments are the present moment and then the next moment and then the next. Holy moments are this moment—the present moment. How do we honor the holiness that we swim in, that swallows us up, every day?

From the earliest stories of our faith, we’ve been taught to see ourselves in this simultaneous state—Moses has a committee meeting to give people instructions for while he’s swallowed up in the clouds by God’s presence. To the people the clouds are like a devouring fire. Moses is consumed, the people are afraid—and forgetful and impatient, and God’s law infuses their lives with this sacred promise that

everything we do together—how we eat, how we do business, how we build a life together—everything matters, everything is infused with holiness, with a sacred trust.

Jesus takes us into the mysterious and powerful connection that is God and the world together. And Peter wants to build something—to bottle it—to find a container to hold on to it. Jesus shows us that the mystery of God with us is made real in a life faithfully lived—a life of radical love and courageous truth, in a life lived for and with others, a life that does not shy away from the pain and promise of every encounter’s healing opportunity.

A Poem by Danna Faulds:

It only takes a reminder to breathe,
a moment to be still, and just like that,
something in me settles, softens, makes
space for imperfection. The harsh voice
of judgment drops to a whisper and I
remember again that life isn't a relay
race; that we will all cross the finish
line; that waking up to life is what we
were born for. As many times as I
forget, catch myself charging forward
without even knowing where I'm going,
that many times I can make the choice
to stop, to breathe, and be, and walk
slowly into the mystery.²

What good does the Holy do us today? What good does it do the world for us to believe that God infuses every moment with a Holy inviolable love—a love that dignifies human life in the midst of the cruel dehumanization that marches on while we pray for a better world?

We want to think it's not possible to be as cruel as the world can be. So, we distract ourselves with the every day as if it is an escape. There is no escape from the world when faith is what defines us. We are here—the cruelty is here—and the promise is here—the mundane is here—the mystery is here—and we live simultaneously washed in wonder and in dishes that need to be washed again and again.

Transfiguration is an invitation to trust that something more is always unfolding. We can't bottle it up, we can't control it—and yet it is here just like oxygen for us to breathe in, to give us vitality, to define our lives.

Might our Lenten discipline be the willingness to see and to savor the holiness of each moment?

In other words: Can we commit to finding more ways to be gentle in this brutal world?

It can be something as simple as taking a spider outside instead of killing it. Slowing down to listen to someone tell a meandering story you've already heard several times before. Finding patience you didn't think you had for someone who is having a difficult day. Looking in the mirror and smiling at the person you see—extending yourself some kindness in a world that tries to convince you you're not enough.

If each moment offers a glimpse of mystery and a dose of the mundane, the faith response is to say thank you for what you teach me about the purpose of being alive.

It was an ordinary day for me—lists of things to do, to catch up on. It was my one day off from coming to church, my one day off of the week--Monday. I was immersed in emails and laundry and loading the dishwasher.

That's when I heard this primal moaning sound—out in the woods. It lasted for just a few seconds and ended with a loud thud—I felt the floor vibrate. I ran outside to see what had happened and saw my horses staring in the direction of an enormous tree down.

I ran down to the tree and was overcome with the smells, with the size, with the moment. I stayed there with her. First walking along her trunk, her branches with buds now beginning their death, too. And then I sat, and cried, and savored her long life—she was massive—probably the tallest tree in the woods there.

As I sat vigil with her, my dog sat sentry behind me—quiet, still.

Not long after I sat down, a powerful whoosh took my attention to the tree still standing behind me—a hawk, there, sitting vigil, too. Maybe he hunted from this tall tree. He knew her. And he sat there, still, with my dog, the tree, and me.

I could smell the fresh dirt of her uprootedness. I could see the rings marking years, decades, too many to count. She was settling now into a forest bed and these woods would absorb her, embrace her, and be nourished by her.

When I finally rose to walk back to the house, the hawk watched me move. My dog and I took about ten steps before I heard another whoosh, this one closer, this one right above my head. The hawk swooped down and flew with strength and speed across the pasture. My dog took off running as fast as he could right under the hawk—and for a few holy moments there they were—flying, running together. The

hawk ascended to a high branch of another tree and my dog turned around and trotted back to me.

Both of us breathless.

We're always that connected—you, me, the hawk, the dog, the tree. And God's living and breathing in it all—calling us to see ourselves as a family—as parts of each other, worthy of awe, worthy of gentle, careful moments together.

Believing means we admit to ourselves that we really never leave these moments—what is fleeting is our attentiveness, not their reality. Our faith tradition believes that everything should change about who we are and how we live when we see the truth about this world. God is here, God is near—mysterious, merciful, mundane, marvelous, monotonous, melodious—God is here.

Learning to trust this truth is our life's work.

(Teach Holy, Holy, Holy Song and congregation sings)

We stumble around in this mystery every day, not knowing how to sustain our wonder and our gratitude. We try to intellectualize it, measure it, prove its existence—but these are defense mechanisms that keep us from just trusting it, that keep us from the gift that faith is—we never leave God's presence, none of us do—believing that we and the whole world are loved and held this way changes everything.

Can we relax into the holiness of this moment, of this shared moment in time as we come to the Table once again? Eucharist is not something reserved for special occasions—it is a practice that wants to transform us—Eucharist is an invitation to a way of life that sees no separation between this Table and every meal you have ever eaten in your life and every meal you ever will eat. We touch into the mystery of God with us here—not to leave it behind, but to believe that what we taste here is and always will be the life God invites us to live together.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *The Book of Hours II*, 12.

² Faulds, Danna, "Walk Slowly." *Go In and In: Poems from the Heart of Yoga*. (2002)