

Sermon for Sunday August 6, 2023 Transfiguration Sunday

On the mountain, things happen. It's usually a clue that something important is going to happen, something that may be an encounter with God, when people climb a mountain. We've got two of those stories today: the Old Testament story of Moses going up the mountain to talk with God and coming back with his face glowing, and the shocking change in the appearance of Jesus Christ on the mountaintop with his disciples, with cameo roles for Moses and Elijah.

In the Gospel reading, something is missing. There's a word that appears in older translations (based on the Greek): "Behold!" it belongs at the start of the sentence saying "Suddenly, they saw two men, Moses and Elijah..."

That "behold" might also be written – in our modern parlance – "hey look!"

Hey look, here are these two figures from the Old Testament! This is important! Pay Attention!

Because, yes, it's about Jesus' transfiguration, the affirmation of his divinity, but it's also about something larger: this scene is a part of a much larger story about God's work and God's purpose. It describes the arc of God's relationship with God's people from the earliest days, about God's face-to-face interaction with certain of those people (Moses and Elijah), about God's continued work with God's people to deepen relationship with them.

Let's look a little closer: something special happens when Jesus and his companions are praying. Jesus' appearance changes. In the Gospel of Luke, special things happen when Jesus is praying: the Holy Spirit comes. We hear the voice of God sometimes, we see the appearance of Jesus changed, we sense the presence of the divine.

Looking closer still: often in this Gospel, the focus is on looking and seeing, in this case the glory of Christ and the shining presence of Moses and Elijah...such a confusing thing that Peter, being Peter, says the first thing that pops into his mind: let's pitch some tents!

We don't know how the disciples know who these holy ancients are, but we can guess that their identity is evident to them because God helped them see who they were.

And Peter, poor Peter, who speaks up with what is patently a silly idea, suddenly goes quiet, as do they all. How to understand what they've seen?

But there are gifts for us imbedded in this text.

Something happens when we pray. It may not be as dramatic as what happens on this mountaintop, but we connect with God. God sees us. God hears us. God, as I said last week, delivers.

That said, it's hard sometimes to parse out what that conversation with God has yielded for us. That's certainly the case for Peter, James and John, who uncharacteristically say nothing about the experience to the other disciples. Three know about this strange and magnificent thing, but the rest of the disciples don't know but just continue to go along with Jesus and the three. Like us, I'd imagine.

It is unusual for us everyday folk to have the full-on spectacle of an encounter with God, Moses and Elijah, isn't it?

But it may be that each of us can think of times when some unexplainable happened, when we sensed God's presence, when a messenger brought a gift of comfort and hope when we were lost, when help showed up. And we pray a prayer of thanksgiving for that moment, which some of us call a "God moment" or a "Holy Spirit moment."

Our mountaintops may not be as high as the one in this scene, our prayers may not be as focused as Jesus' was, but that doesn't mean that we don't stop praying, stop the conversation with our God. Because God does keep showing up in the most subtle of ways, whether we pray asking for something or whether we pray in thanksgiving for something that felt holy.

Most of the time, we're simply praying to keep that connection with God at the center of our focus. We don't ask for big things – mostly. And the very fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, feels the desire and need to pray to his father in heaven reminds us that prayer is something to do continually. All the time. No fancy words needed. Just being present so that we, with our limited ability to see that which is holy, can be present to the wonder that is God's love for us.

My days of hiking up mountains are past me. But my days of praying for God in my life are not. No matter what your age or your physical condition, prayer is the best way to feel that mountain-top realization that God is your constant companion. No tents need to be pitched. Just pray, and know that God is with you, always.

Amen.