

Unveiling Incarnation

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Psalm 99

A number of years ago, I was hiking a 14er with a group of friends. Actually, we were hiking two fourteen-thousand-foot peaks that connected by about a half mile of trail. We had peaked the first and were about halfway to the second when we noticed that a storm was building. At that elevation, when storms come in, they move fast. We were well above tree line without any hope of shelter, and we were literally walking the highest ridgeline in sight. My friend turned to look at me and her eyes bugged out of her head and she went instantly pale. My hair was standing on end, fanning out from my head because of the electricity in the air. Everyone instantly turned and started running back down the trail, hoping to get off the peak before the lightening started. And then the first flash came, followed immediately by a bone-shaking crash. And everyone halted. There was no way to outrun the storm and we knew it. You are taught two things about lightning storms above tree line. First, separate the group because lightning transfers and more than one group of hikers have been casualties because they were huddled together. Second, the highest point of your body is most likely to get struck and people don't survive a bolt to the head. Lightning position is crouched down as low as you can get, with your hind end elevated above your shoulders. Within moments we each found ourselves alone. The storm was so loud we couldn't have heard one another if we'd tried to talk but we had scattered across the mountain. And we were as vulnerable as we had ever been in our lives; completely unprotected. Crouched down like that, I felt the crackle of the electricity against my earrings. And I made my peace with God. It was weirdly peaceful. Facedown, alone, and entirely at God's mercy, I experienced an inner calm that is difficult to describe. Eventually the storm passed and we all miraculously made it home in one piece, but it was a defining moment for me. When I read these accounts of Moses and the disciples on the mountain

with God, this is what I envision. My life has been filled with experiences of God; some of them visible to others, while some have been spiritual and away from public view. But I have felt God and those experiences have formed me.

As embodied, enfleshed, people, our bodies are the sacramental location where we experience God. And it is from our bodies that we express God back out into the world. So, how have you experienced God? Exodus uses the language of God's presence on the mountain appearing as "devouring fire" and a "cloud". These ideas are symbolic attempts to express divine mystery. Many times our experiences with God are difficult to put into words. The people of God embrace this mystery. What we feel in our bodies, what our senses smell, taste, feel, hear, and touch, are unique to each of us. Some of us might prefer to believe our thoughts about God are far more relevant than our bodies' experiences, but our brain is the place where our bodies' experiences are processed. Our brains cannot function apart from our bodies. Our cognition is embodied. Like Jesus, we exist in human flesh, and being enfleshed is the way we come to know God. Our experiences matter because they are sacramental places where God's transcendence becomes immanent.

God is holy. God is other. God exists in glory and sometimes that leads us to conclude that we are too far removed from God for that gap to be bridged. But God is always calling us into relationship. In Exodus, God instructed Moses to come up to him. God wanted to give Moses the Law which would become the means through which the whole nation would then enter into relationship with God. In Matthew's gospel and in Peter's own letter we hear the story of The Transfiguration where Jesus invited his closest friends up the mountain with him. The unveiling on that mountain became a testimony to the world of the divinity of Christ. And when Peter, James, and John dropped on their faces before God, Jesus bent down, touched them, and invited them to stand. God's voice terrified them

because of their vulnerability in the presence of that glory. But Jesus acted as their mediator. The transformational reality of Jesus' presence made it possible for them to stand before God. And soon, the relationship these disciples had with Jesus would make them participants in that same work. It was their witness, and now ours that invites other into experiences with God.

So how have you experienced God? The words God said to the disciples were "this is my beloved son, with him I am well pleased, listen to him". Listening to God takes a variety of forms, but it's never just about auditory listening. Listening is about noticing what God is doing and joining the work. For Moses' people, listening meant heeding the Law. For the Psalmist, it meant "righteousness", making the world right through creating equity, defending the vulnerable, and upholding justice. And Peter echoes Jesus own words by encouraging his readers to be attentive, to listen and notice the prophetic witness because Christ has spoken in the past and will continue to lead us as the "morning star rises in our hearts".

The reason God so passionately instructed the disciples to listen to Jesus was because things were about to get difficult. Immediately before Jesus took these three up the mountain, he had predicted his death. In fact, Jesus was on the mountain getting consolation and encouragement for the work ahead from the prophets who had gone before him. When the grup descended the mountain, they were beginning the journey towards Jesus' crucifixion. God told them to listen to Jesus because it would become increasingly difficult to accept what he said. It would become increasingly difficult to accept his state sanctioned death as anything other than a failure and defeat. But it was their memory of this experience after Jesus' resurrection that would testify to Christ's victory. The disciples needed the encouragement to listen, to pay attention, and trust because it was that experience that would carry them through the dark days ahead.

So why does it matter that we experience God, that we listen to Jesus and follow? It matters because we are Christians, which means “little Christs”. Jesus bent down and touched the disciples to invite them to stand up and follow him. The more intimately we know God- the more experiences we have with God- the better we will be at doing Jesus’ work. We seek to know God so we can make God known. We are all meant to participate in the divine life. Peter says we follow in the line of the prophets, “men and women moved by the Holy Spirit (who) spoke from God”. According to the Psalmist, our stories of God cause others to join in God’s work of justice and equity and that work stirs others to sing together of God’s faithfulness. We do not participate in the divine life with just our brains; we do it with our bodies. And it is through our bodies that the world around us is made right.

The fire on the mountain symbolizes mystery, but fire also symbolizes transformative holiness. Fire consumes and it burns away waste. Walking up that mountain and following God’s invitation into the fire is an invitation to change. That may feel fearsome. If we haven’t ever met God in a vulnerable place, if we’ve never felt exposed or defenseless then it can be terrifying. The disciples knew that fear and it struck them to the ground. Until we experience God’s nearness as our safety, it can be difficult to trust. But Jesus is gentle and he tells us not to fear. He invites us to stand with him, to feel the divine glow on our faces and to allow ourselves to be transformed by it so that it reflects from us into the world.

God is always inviting us into relationship, into divine experiences. As we listen, what is the invitation we hear? What are we being invited to feel, to taste, and to hear, so we may know God in some new way? Or perhaps we’re being invited to offer that to others, to create a more equitable world by bending down and touching someone else. Perhaps our next experience of God will be in using our bodies to demonstrate God’s presence to others.

May we be a people who participate in the divine life, allowing ourselves to be touched by God, and moving to touch others.