

Bible Study
Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
February 26, 2017

[RCL] Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Exodus 24:12-18

Exodus 24:12-18 provides an account of Moses's ascent of Mt. Saini for purposes of receiving the law and commandments. The reading begins with God's two-part instruction to Moses to "come up to me on the mountain, and wait there." Moses complies with these instructions, and sets out with Joshua toward the mountain. (Before leaving, however, Moses gives a similar instruction to Israel's elders, directing them to "wait here for us until we come to you again." The significance of this directive will be keenly observed later in Chapter 32.) Then, alone, Moses continues up toward the mountain. Critically, Moses stops short of reaching its summit. Meanwhile, the glory of the Lord *settled* on the mountain, covering it in a cloud. Moses waits on the mountain—but outside of the cloud—for six days. On the seventh day, God beckons Moses from within the cloud to enter in it—God's glory then visibly appearing "like a devouring fire" at the summit. (v. 17). Moses obeys, entering the cloud and climbing to the top of the mountain. Moses remained on the mountaintop and within the cloud of God's glory for forty days and forty nights.

The sequence of events leading up to Moses's climactic ascent into the glory of God on the mountaintop is marked by an important pause between Moses's initial ascent onto the mountain and then his ultimate ascent onto the mountain's top into the glory of God. In both periods, Moses patently demonstrates obedience to God's instruction and invitation: God first beckons Moses to *come* to the mountain, and Moses does. Then, God calls to Moses from within the cloud to enter and Moses does.

Equally important to these incremental sequences of ascending movement, however, is Moses's obedience to God's intervening directive to wait. For six days, Moses waits—on the side of the mountain and maybe only halfway up it—until such time that God asks him to continue onward and into God's immediate and outwardly visible presence. During those six, exposed days, Moses waits in a liminal space between Israel camped below and the cloud of God's glory above. It is perhaps in this space that Moses, while standing with a full and up-close view of the devouring fire of God's glory, is prepared to enter into God's presence. Perhaps for Moses, the *coming* and the *waiting* are equally important in experiencing God's presence and glory.

- In what ways does God call you into closer proximity with God's self?
- In what ways has God called you to simply wait?
- Do you ever feel as though you are waiting in a liminal space between that which you have always known and something else that is greater than what you can imagine?

Psalm 99

Psalm 99 is a hymn of praise centered on God's hegemonic attributes. The hymn commences with statements concerning God's exaltation over and differentiation from the peoples over which God reigns. Included among these statements celebrating God's governorship over the peoples, stands an attribution of God as a lover and executor of justice. The kingly exaltations that mark the first five verses of the Psalm are interposed by the reinforcing refrain, "Holy is he." (vv. 3,5).

The latter half of the Psalm (vv. 6-9) demonstrates a shift in focus away from the distinction between God and God's kingdom and toward a recollection of the historical incidences of obedience, faithfulness and covenant-keeping between them. These verses recount in varying specificities incidences of God as both lawgiver and forgiver and God's people as wrongdoing but penitent. These incidences are freighted with allusions to the Sinai-based, law-giving narratives and include referents to Moses, to God speaking from the cloud, and to God speaking from the holy mountain. The Psalm concludes with a statement that God is holy.

- In what ways may a law-giver demonstrate an inclination toward justice?
- What does it mean to say that God is holy?
- What attributes does God exhibit that demonstrate holiness?

2 Peter 1:16-21

2 Peter 1:16-21 consists of two principal statements—both, three verses in length—purposed to bolster the credibility of the author's other teachings set out in the letter. In the first section (vv. 16-18), the author establishes their credentials as one personally acquainted with the person and majesty of Jesus Christ. To do this, the author first disclaims “cleverly devised myths” as the sources of inspiration or instructional content. (v. 16). Instead, the author acts as an *eyewitness* to Jesus Christ's majesty and as one who was personally present at Jesus's transfiguration. Given this intimate proximity to God and to Jesus (indeed, the author claims that he heard God's voice that identified Jesus as God's son with whom God was well-pleased), the author's teaching inferentially reliable and authoritative.

In the second section (vv. 19-21), the author describes prophecy as originating from the Holy Spirit rather than from human imagination or from the human will. Implicitly, the author holds out his teachings as confirmed prophetic messages. Using metaphors of darkness and sources of light, the author admonishes the reader to closely attend to these confirmed prophetic messages.

- What is your understanding of prophecy?
- Are prophetic messages still heard today?
- How do we discern the implications of today's prophetic messages?

Matthew 17:1-9

Matthew 17:1-9 presents a narrative account of Jesus's transfiguration. The passage begins as Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Once there, Jesus is “transfigured” in front of them; his face shines “like the sun” and his clothing became “dazzling white.” (v. 2). As this occurs, Moses and Elijah suddenly appear also. This gospel narrative is silent in describing their appearance (*cf.* Lk. 9:31).

What follows are multiple incidences of audible speech—some preserved as direct quotations—that occurred on the mountain. First, Moses and Elijah *talk* with the transfigured Jesus. The narrative does not share the merits of their conversation. The narrative does, however, recount Peter's exclamation that occurs next: “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.” (v. 4). Although Matthew's gospel does not share the impetus driving Peter's exclamation (*cf.* Mk. 9:6; Lk. 9:33), its awkwardness is immediately evident to the reader. What's more, as Peter is speaking, his outburst is interrupted both by a bright cloud overshadows them, and also a voice that emanates from within the cloud.

The voice pronounces: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” (v. 5); *compare* (Mt. 3:17). Upon hearing this voice, the disciples fall to the ground, altogether rapt in fear. The final narrative quotations contained the reading come from Jesus. First, Jesus urges his disciples to rise and to fear not; second Jesus directs his disciples to not disclose that which they observed until “after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (v. 9).

The spoken passages recounted in this pericope supply a measure of authenticity to its narrative arc. Peter’s interposition of an inappropriate offer to construct makeshift tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah is the most useful for this purpose. In hearing Peter’s offer, readers are able to not only share in the palpable discomfort that Peter experienced at the time, but also appreciate the patent incompatibility of Peter’s proposal with that which transpired before him. This incompatibility is, by extension, demonstrative of the differentiation between the human (Peter) and the divine (Jesus transfigured).

The consequence of this differentiation reaches its climax when God announces Jesus’s son-ship: the disciples are reduced to abject fear and Jesus is (ostensibly at least) elevated beyond even his transfigured state. It is at this point of ultimate differentiation that Jesus *comes down to* his disciples, and touching them, implores them to get up and to fear not. Thus, we observe in microcosm the incarnation of Christ as God with us.

- When do you feel the farthest from, or the most differentiated from, God?
- At those points when you perceive the greatest distance between yourself and God, what erases that distance such that you may again participate in communion with God?

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