

Jim Gill

February 26, 2017

"In the Clouds"

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9 2 Peter 1:16-21

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS 24:12-18

This morning's lesson from Exodus records the first time Moses went up into a mountain amongst the clouds. It was during those days that Moses received the law, the word of the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord from Exodus 24:12-18.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 17:1-9

Our Scripture lesson for the day from the Gospel of Luke describes something that has only happened once and has never happened since. What we are going to read about this morning is what we have come to call, 'The Transfiguration.' Please stand as we hear the word of the Lord.

Let us pray. O Lord our God, You are great indeed, clothed in majesty and splendor, wrapped in light. In the solitude of a mountain height you revealed your glory in Jesus Christ. We praise you for this glimpse of the mystery of our redemption. Let your love shine in all we do and say that the world may see the radiant reflected light of God.

For some, tonight will be a mountaintop experience. Of course I'm thinking of the concert with Frank here in the sanctuary, but there are others who will have an even more of a mountaintop experience. I'm speaking of the Oscars where actors will be rewarded for playing someone they are not.

Saturday night Barbara Wilson and I went to the play "Play On! at the Black Box Theater at Lee College. It was a play about putting on a play. From the First Act to the Third we watched the actors transforming themselves from actors in street clothes practicing their lines to characters in costume delivering their lines.

The Actors in line to be honored tonight have the ability to transform themselves to become the characters they play. As they age some will alter their faces hopefully to their advantage. Sometimes the change is not just in looks but in their whole image -- including their names. Issur Danielovitch Densky changed his image by changing his name to Kirk Douglas. Frances Gum transformed her image into Judy Garland. Archibald Leach became Cary Grant. Would you have paid money to see Marion Morrison in the movies? Maybe, but Marion didn't take that chance. He became John Wayne. Dwayne Johnson changed his name to be known as a wrestler called, "The Rock." But now he has changed his name again from the wrestler "the Rock" to Dwayne Johnson, the Movie Star, who however is not nominated for an award tonight. Give him time.

What happened on the Mount Hermon was much more than a transformation. It was much more than a name change to make a potential star more appealing.

Jesus' was transfigured. His transfiguration didn't change who he was into someone more appealing. It revealed who Jesus really was and it was jaw dropping. It was earth shaking. It was a mountain top experience on a real mountain.

Recently I was visiting with Rafael Melendez as he prepared for his heart bypass surgery and he was showing me some pictures of a visit to Hawaii. In one of the pictures he showed me he was on a mountain and it looked like he was surrounded by fog. I said, 'Boy that was a foggy day.' He said, "No, those are clouds." He was on a mountain in the clouds.

The Bible is full of Mountaintop experiences. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the 10 commandments written on tablets of stone by the finger of God. It was on Mount Carmel Elijah had a showdown with the prophets of Baal. This morning's passage takes place on a different mountain-Mount Hermon.

Matthew says that Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white." It brings to mind how Moses' appearance changed when he came down from his encounter with God on Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in hand. "Moses did not know that his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining and they were afraid to come near him."

The other person that was present on this Mountain top was the prophet Elijah. Elijah's mountain top experience involved facing down 500 prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal called upon their gods for the better part of a day to no avail. But when Elijah called upon his God fire came down from heaven and consumed Elijah's sacrifice.

This month we've been looking at Jesus' SERMON on the mount-the beatitudes, salt and leaven and light, how to pray. This is Jesus' VISION on the mount. This is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount without words--His power point demonstration of his power to make a point.

This Vision of Jesus on the mountain top was so fantastic that Peter said, "Let's build 3 booths, one for you one for Moses and one for Elijah. Bless Peter's heart. He always just says the first thing that comes to his mind. Here Peter sees Jesus AND Moses AND Elijah and says, "Let's build Mount Hermon World!"

But Jesus refused the luxury of staying in this mountaintop away from the hassles of the masses. He had a mission to accomplish. So as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision."

In the gospels we see how many times angels spoke to people in dreams. Angels spoke to Joseph 3 times. Angels spoke to the magi men in a dream. But on the mountain top Peter James and John saw a vision. A vision is a "when

you're awake" dream. It's a, "I better pinch myself because I must be dreaming" experience.

There are many kinds of visions. The most elemental vision is physical. "I see a round, blue ball- 2 inches in diameter, period.--nothing more and nothing less. This pertains to physical qualities that can be weighed, measured, counted, useful in science for comparing and classifying.

Another dimension of vision deals with a different dimension of experience and meaning. I can enjoy watching a young boy in the park throwing a ball for his dog to fetch. It is of little consequence whether the ball is red or blue, large or small.

Years later the same boy may be beating Wilt Chamberlin's record of scoring 42 points in an All Star Basketball Game by ten...Last Sunday Anthony Davis scored 52 points in this year's All Star Game. That's a different vision of a ball (The West won 192 to 182.)

What did this Vision on the Mount mean for Jesus and for Peter James and John? Physically they were on the top of a mountain. Maybe they are a little out of breath from climbing. Maybe ... what they say took their breath away. Suddenly, Jesus begins to shine...his face shone like the sun and his clothes are a dazzling white. Jesus is flanked by the two most famous men of the Jewish Faith, the greatest lawgiver and the greatest prophet. Then comes God's voice--the one that Jesus had heard at his baptism and now hears again-- "This is my beloved son. Listen to Him!"

Matthew doesn't record anything that Jesus or Moses or Elijah say even though he says they were talking with each other. The only words that were recorded were God's—Don't listen to Peter. You can't stay on the mountaintop. Listen to Jesus.

What did Jesus say that they or we should listen to him? When Jesus was asked which the greatest commandment was, He said, "The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul mind and strength. A second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang all the law and the prophets." Everything Moses wrote--the law, and everything Elijah did, hang on loving God and loving our neighbors and loving ourselves.

The fact is, not everyone will "see" visions. Jesus took only three out of the twelve to be with him on the mountain. That's only 25%. Those who do see the visions though, should receive them gladly and share what they saw with those who didn't. In the church those who haven't seen the vision must trust those who have seen and listen to them and follow them.

This Vision established for Peter James and John that Jesus was greater than the greatest men the nation of Israel had ever produced. These three would need to remember this vision as they saw Jesus fulfilling his mission. The Vision

on the Mount revealed who Jesus really was. The Mission on the Cross revealed what Jesus came to do--to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When Peter James and John saw Jesus beaten, and scourged and dying on the cross completing his Mission, they would need to remember the Vision on the mount to make sense of something so horrible.

We might be tempted to think that a life-transforming experience couldn't possibly happen to us. We could block out the vision of who we are to be and what we are to do with our own prejudice, or preconceived ideas, so that no new light could shine in upon us. But I say, never count yourself out. You have as much going for you as did Peter, James and John... AND you have their testimony of what they saw. Peter James and John were privileged to see the Vision on the Mount because they climbed the mountain. They didn't wait for the mountain to come to them.

I believe God still gives "I better pinch myself I must be dreaming" visions today. What is your vision of who God is calling you to be in this part of God's world? What is your vision of this church's mission? What do you see this church becoming? What do you see yourself becoming? Who are the 25% of our church and what are they and our session seeing? What is their vision of who we are and where we are going as a congregation and are we willing to follow their lead?

I'm sure that part of your vision of who you are and who we are as a church involves worshipping in our sanctuary... but it also has to involve leaving our "sanctuary" and getting the gospel back out on the road. The church is so much more than a building to enter and exit. We are the church of Jesus Christ wherever we go--beyond going to this building to going to your home, to your office, to your gas station, to your classroom, to your community.

Yesterday morning I helped hand out the medals for the Jailbreak Run. I got to put the ribbon around the neck of Randall O'Brian, the Superintendent of Goose Creek Independent School District, as he crossed the finish line after running the half marathon. What was amazing to me was the wide variety of people of all walks of life choosing to run. Sure there were those who crossed the line first, but it was not a race per se. Everyone who crossed the finish line got a medal. It was a human race.

One man crossed the line on a 3 wheel bicycle that he drove with his hands. He had lost a leg but that didn't stop him. We should not let things stop us. At Faith we may be host to Meals on Wheels, but we, as followers of Jesus are called to be Appeals on Wheels. That's why I've been appealing to you to come tonight to support the Diana Gray Child Care Center, even if you don't like Country Music. Come because you love children.

We are almost concluding Black History Month. In January we celebrated the life of Martin Luther's Namesake--Martin Luther King Jr. Last Sunday Mark Koenig shared several of his quotes. Since we are talking about mountaintops this morning I want to share a portion of one of his sermons. He said,

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now--because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any [man]. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." The next day, he was assassinated.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream that has grown into a Vision. That Vision grew into a movement. The Vision on the Mount revealed to Peter James and John who Jesus really was and has grown into a movement. They obeyed Jesus and didn't tell anyone else about the vision until after Jesus' mission was accomplished. But now, they have told us what they saw through these gospel accounts. What remains is our response to what those three saw the day Jesus said, "Follow me, and took them up to a mountain top. What remains is what we will do having been let in on their privileged information.

How will we respond to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount AND his Vision on the Mount? Is Jesus just another lawgiver like Moses or just another prophet like Elijah? Or is he one upon whose words and actions hang ALL the Laws and the Prophets. What remains is OUR response to this Vision on the Mount. What remains is our answer to the question...what will you do...what will we do with this Vision? How will we put our gifts into play with our feet on the ground informed by what Peter, James and John saw... in the clouds?

Let's pray. Dear Lord, You are so marvelous, so stunning, and so brilliant. During your life among us your glory was cloaked, subdued. We couldn't have handled seeing who you really were all that time. Thank you for this episode in your life, for trusting 3 of your friends with a vision of who you really are. Thank you that YOU resisted the temptation to stay on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah and that you came back down to our level and gave your life for us and fulfilled your Mission to take away our sins. Having given us a glimpse of your glory this morning, fill us with your Holy Spirit so we can glimpse a vision of who you are calling us to be and the mission you are calling us to fulfill. In Jesus name we pray.

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