

February 19, 2023
“Through the Water: The Truth”
Matthew 17:1-9
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I don't know if you remember, but a week ago today, there was a little game. I know, I know—the *best* team wasn't playing, but even if you didn't have a team on the field, you probably got drawn into the pomp and circumstance that surrounds- the Super Bowl. It begins months before we even know who will be playing when they announce the half-time performer, and then the commercials start to leak and we get a chance to see what companies have paid millions of dollars to sell us their products. Then, there's the food – if I'm honest, this could be my favorite part—shows like the Today show begin a week ahead to tell you how to make your Super Bowl Spread.

Then, the day comes and pregame starts at- what 1:00 for a game that doesn't begin until 6? I think the pregame show is actually longer than the game itself! And, the half-time show—what a spectacle! There were fireworks, floating platforms, and a pregnancy announcement.

Don't get me wrong—it was a good game and a great show, but the hype is a little over the top.

After all, the show that Rhianna put on can't hold a candle to the one that Jesus displayed in our Scripture reading today. Ok- so it's a little bit of a leap to go from Rhianna and the Super Bowl to Jesus on the

mountain, but stay with me. Jesus wasn't known for his "showy displays". What happened on that mountain was a once in His lifetime event—one that Peter, James and John got front row seats for. It's an event that makes us a bit uncomfortable—after all, for the most part, we Christians are pretty quiet- we're don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing- kind of people. We don't go around talking about that time that Jesus glowed up on the mountain very often—in fact, this is one of those stories that we forget about because we don't know what to do with the Transfiguration (which is another term for transformation) that happened on that day.

But, it's a story that is recorded in 3 of the 4 gospels. It's an important story, and it has something to say to our lives. Jesus, who seems relatively sensible most of the time, all of a sudden pulls out all the stops and goes for the glitz, for the big show. It seems out of character somehow. It seems over the top.

So, what can this mountaintop experience teach us to help us live our lives today?

Let's start with talking about who this experience was for? Was Jesus the beneficiary, or was it meant to teach Peter, James, John, and us something? Commentators have argued over this for years, and the consensus seems to be "Yes".

This was an important experience for Jesus as He prepared for His march toward Jerusalem where He would give His life. Jesus was known for taking time away to go and pray. This was not His first time going away to pray. Jesus frequently stepped aside to nurture His relationship with God, to gain strength and wisdom for His journey ahead. This time was similar. Jesus needed to get away from all of the needs that surrounded Him—from those who needed to be taught, healed, saved. He needed to fill Himself for the difficult journey ahead that would lead to the Cross— If you want to continue the football analogy, He needed a half-time pep talk from the assistant coaches. Put another way, He needed to fill His spiritual reservoir by coming into the presence of God because the journey ahead would be long, and hard, and would end at the Cross. So, He went up the mountain. He was met by the presence of God—so much that the Spirit burned within Him and He radiated light. He was met by Moses- who likely represents the law, and by Elijah- who represents the prophets. God had been working throughout time- through the law and the prophets to bring God's people back into relationship. And now, on that mountain, God's redeeming work was manifest in the person of Jesus. Jesus, his Son, His Beloved, who stood there as one claimed by the glory of God, radiant and shining- the one who fulfilled both the law and the prophets.

And, Peter, James and John got to witness it all. But it's a lot to take in. I have to sa, that I love Peter. He is in the middle of this experience, and suddenly he realizes that something really important is going on, and thinks, "I have to mark this occasion." I think that if he would've had a cell phone back then, he would've pulled it out to start recording.

But, have you ever noticed that when you want to record a special event like this, that often times, you end up observing it through the little screen, instead of taking in what is happening in front of your eyes? I don't know how many of my kids' events I watched through that lens, when it was happening right in front of my eyes.

I imagine that this is why God begins to speak to Peter as he suggests building some booths to mark the occasion. As Peter is speaking, a bright cloud comes over and God speaks, making His presence known, claiming Jesus as His Son and exhorting Peter, James and John to listen. To listen... Peter, James and John are bowled over in awe. They fall to the ground- amazed by the transformation of Jesus, the glory of

God, and the intensity of the presence of God. And, in that moment, when they are overwhelmed and in awe, Jesus comes to them.... Jesus touches them and reassures them.

The very presence of God became real on that mountain in bright blazing light and in a voice from heaven. And, if we're honest, isn't that the kind of experience of God that we would all love to have? Something unmistakable, something transforming, something that knocks us over with awe? That's what many in "Christian speak" call the mountaintop experience—those times when we feel the presence of God in real and tangible ways. And, if you've ever seen someone who has just encountered God, they seem to shine—and it makes you want to say, "I'll have what they're having."

We need the mountain top experiences to help us through our lives, just like Jesus needed it- in fact, even more than Jesus needed it to carry us through our days. You might be thinking, this all sounds good, but how? How do we get to the mountaintop; how do we open ourselves to the presence of God? Where do I start?

The answer is that you start by setting out up the mountain....

There's a Robert Frost poem entitled, "The Mountain", which tells of a conversation with a New England farmer at the base of a mountain. The visitor, aiming to climb the mountain, asks the farmer all about it. Turns out that the farmer has never climbed the mountain—he's only heard the stories of what others have seen- stories of a stream that is warm in the winter and cool in the summer- stories of a beautiful vista at the top. He's lived his whole life around the base of the mountain, heard the stories, and yet he's never set off to climb the mountain himself. Kind of like living in Lancaster but never making the climb of Mount Pleasant. "It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain you've worked around the foot of all your life." (<https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041400>)

There it was, all along. He could have set out upon the upward trail to explore the beauty and majesty for himself, but somehow never did.

Sometimes this how it is for us when it comes to our knowledge of God. Sometimes, we are content to depend on the hearsay of others. But, then, we miss out on experiencing the beauty and majesty for ourselves. (<https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041400>)

The reality is that if we want to experience the awe and wonder, we have to start up the metaphorical mountain. No one, of course, can dictate where God's going to show up. Even so, there are certain things we can do to position ourselves in the right place at the right time. And, here's the good news— we don't have to make our own way. We can take the paths that others have walked before us. We can depend on guides to show us the way so that earthbound folk like us stand a better-than-average chance of encountering the living God- we often call these spiritual disciplines or means of grace. There are some tried and true paths where people have reliably found a connection with God. There are paths that can lead us up the mountain.

And, what a great time to consider these as we stand on the verge of the season of Lent. Sometimes, people give up things for Lent as a way of denying themselves as Jesus did. But, I like to encourage people to try taking on a spiritual discipline—to try incorporating one of these ways to put yourself on the path that can help you to be in the right place at the right time for God's presence to be sparked in your life.

First, there are Acts of Piety- like reading scripture, meditating, prayer, fasting, taking communion. We're not talking just about a quick hurried, scripted grace before dinner or the memorized prayer at bedtime. We all have those prayers that we say so well by memory that we hardly think about them anymore. "God is

great, God is good and we thank Him for our food....” Great place to start, but when you stop thinking about the words that you are saying and are thinking more about the pizza in front of you, you probably aren’t making much of a real connection with God in those moments. It’s like a little girl, whose parents had taught her the classic bedtime prayer for children that begins, “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

One night she thought, “Why does God need to hear me say this again?” So she decided to record herself saying the prayer, and then she played the recording each night when she went to bed.

We might smile at her story, but we have prayer recordings in our heads; they might be a little longer or more sophisticated, but they can and often are, repeated mindlessly. (Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, Crossway, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-2/sermon-illustrations-prayer/>)

True prayer requires mindfulness, it can be a conversation with God as we walk or drive or do dishes or watch the news. Or, it can be as you sit quietly and look out the window. But, we have to remember that prayer is a conversation- not a list of “I wants”. It has pauses and moments of listening for God. If you aren’t sure where to start, we have some books available for you to help you pray through the season of Lent.

Scripture reading is another discipline. We can read a passage and just go on with life or we can turn that passage into a prayer, asking God to speak to us through the words. The Psalms are especially good for this. Or, you can read the scripture passage 2-3 times, maybe from different translations, and see what words or phrases stick out to you, what images pass through your mind. YouVersion Bible App is a free app that will send you a different scripture each morning and give you access to different translations. The Upper Room devotional is another resource and is available in the parlor or in the back of the sanctuary.

Some “Acts of Piety” are communal and lived out together. Small groups are a great way to study scripture together and to lift each other up. Looking back, even Jesus had His small group that He took with Him to the mountain.....

It shouldn’t come as any surprise to you that a preacher would be encouraging you to worship. It is our hope that every time you come to worship that there is something in the sermon, something in the music, something in the community that helps you sense the presence of God in your life. It’s when those words speak right to what you are going through right now or just what you needed to hear. Worship is an opportunity to simply stand in awe of God and to feel His love, to listen for Jesus’ call on your life.

Many of faith’s guides have found God’s presence through worship- from Isaiah who was in the temple when he had a vision from God to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, whose heart was strangely warmed in a service at Aldersgate.

Even now, in Wilmore, KY, there’s a chapel service that began over a week ago, on Wednesday, February 8th, and is still going on. It started as a regular chapel service that happens every week at Asbury University. Participants felt the spirit moving and kept the service going for people to pray and sing. Now, people are coming from other colleges, and from other states, and they all share that they feel the spirit moving... (Don’t worry- I’m not going to keep you for a week)

God truly does show up in worship.

God and God’s grace can also be found through Acts of Mercy that are both individual and communal- through our doing of good works, through visiting with the sick, caring for the poor. God can be felt when we seek justice, want to end oppression and discrimination. It is often in our service to others that we feel

God's presence around us, giving us strength we didn't know that we had, carrying us ever further up the mountain.

While these "Acts of Piety" and "Acts of Mercy" don't have to be fancy, or use scripted words, they do require some sacrifice of time, although they can be worked into your everyday life, and they move us up the mountain, and help us to more fully see God's presence when they are done with an open heart and mind, not out of a sense of obligation.

John Coen, our Director of Creative Ministries, shared a devotion this week during our staff worship. In it, he talked about a husband who had gone to buy his wife a card for Valentine's day. He fought the crowds to get to the cards and started to look through them when he heard the man next to him say, "There- good enough- check that off the list" as if the expression of love was obligatory, just something to check off the list, to mark done, to be done simply because it was expected.

God wants more. God want us to come not out of obligation (Jesus already fulfilled the law), but with open hearts, to climb to the summit because it's somewhere we want to be—with someone we want to spend time with....

For most of us, though, our encounters with God are quieter, less flashy than those during the Transfiguration, but they still have all the chills and thrills. Moments when we feel the spirit of God as close as the air that we breathe and we get goose bumps or we are tingly.

For me, one of those moments came on a high ropes course. I was in college, on a retreat, still struggling with claiming my own faith. One of the activities at the retreat was to go up on a high ropes course. If you haven't seen one of these, you are on ropes that stretch between trees and you go through different obstacles to get from one tree to another. Now, I don't love heights. But I climbed the 20 or so feet up in the air and was doing all right until I got to a leap of faith I had to jump from a tiny platform at one tree to a tiny platform at another tree and there was nothing underneath. (Now, truth be told, I was hooked in to a rope above me that would have kept me from falling, but that didn't mean anything to me).

I remember being terrified. I clung to the tree. Tears started to roll down my cheeks. There was no way that I was going to make that jump. Others down below tried to encourage me, letting me know that it would be OK, but I could only cling to that tree and say that I wanted to get down. Finally, I breathed a prayer—nothing bold or flashy, just a simple, "God help me" and it was as if a gentle breeze started to blow—nothing crazy like the winds we've had this week, but a gentle breeze and I felt the hair on my neck stand up and I felt surrounded by the breeze, comforted, held. My tears stopped and I was no longer paralyzed by fear. I could make the leap of faith because I knew that I didn't do it alone.

We all have those times when we are terrified, paralyzed with fear and uncertain how to take the next step. Times when the tears roll down our cheeks and we cling to the known out of fear of the unknown. We need to feel His presence, to feel His hand on our shoulders, comforting us, His Spirit surrounding us to help us take the next step. God is there in those moments, as real and present as He was with Jesus on the mountain. God is there to affirm that we are His beloved and to encourage us to listen to the Christ who said, "Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

It's this experience. This heart-pounding, hair-raising, spirit-breathed kind of experience that reminds us that God is as close as the air that we breathe. That God is there on the mountain. That God is there in the valleys. That we can have what Jesus had- a relationship with God that was so deep that it made Him glow.

We simply have to take the leap of faith, take the next step and start our way up the mountain. For, when we climb the mountain, when we go looking for God, we just might find Him, in all of His power and glory. And, once we've been to the mountaintop, once we have been struck with awe, given reassurance and filled with the Spirit, we carry that experience of God's presence with us as we go back down the mountain, through the valleys and the difficult journeys of our lives, touching the lives of others, knowing that we do not go alone. We journey with the Risen Savior. Amen and Amen.

Prayer for New Drivers:

O God, as parents, grandparents, friends and church family, we have had the blessing of watching these young people grown and learn. As they take this step toward further independence and adulthood, some are thinking "Yes! Freedom! Finally!" while others feel a bit more hesitant. Be with them in their venturing. May your spirit be ever alert within them, directing them so that they may enjoy the ride but be attentive to their travels. Be with their families as they release them a bit more on the path toward adulthood. There's the mix of relief that we won't have to drive to practices anymore, but knowing that we will miss that time together. Be with all those on the road. Bring peace during moments of frustration and grace when anger starts to rise. Help us all, to travel safely in your spirit. Amen.