February 26, 2017   
Matthew 17:1-9   
Awe

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Matthew 17:1-9 The Message

Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him. Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?” While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus. Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

Wonder. What a great word. How often in our days do we wonder? How often do we stop and listen and wonder about how God created all of this beauty? I am so glad we sang “How Great Thou Art” today, it is a song that reminds me of the majesty of God.

Today is a day to be amazed at the majesty and wonder of God. Today is Transfiguration Sunday when Jesus glows on the mountain. Jesus is amazing. Jesus glowed! He kept company with the greats, with Moses and Elijah. And the disciples respond to Jesus with awe. Jesus was compassionate, and wise and holy. And we are in awe. When we are in awe of God, when we praise God, it is our best attempt to feel, say, or sing something appropriate to God. I do this best when I am outside. The last few days have been gorgeous! Thank you God for the breeze on my face and the warm sun at my back. Thank you for the blooming flowers and the green grass. Thank you for the lawnmower sounds and children laughing on their bikes. It is like in the Sound of Music, we share with God a few of our favorite things about God and God’s Creation.[[1]](#footnote-2) That is praising God.

Praising God or being in awe of God is how we show our love to God. Do you remember when you first fell in love? You can’t think about anything else but that person. You are useless at work, you can’t study, you are lost in wonder and daydream about the person all the time. Can you imagine being that way, consumed with thoughts about God all of the time?

Friday night we were at my cousin’s house for dinner and they have a one-year-old baby girl. Everett was entertaining the baby and she kept laughing the most wonderful laugh. I felt like I was in the presence of God. Or have you ever seen a toddler take their first steps? The way they teeter and totter is adorable! The joy that you feel in that moment, watching that once in a life time moment is the way that we are called to feel about God. Filled with joy and wonder and awe and praise. Have you ever smelled a gorgeous flower that you grew in your own garden? You are filled with joy and wonder and awe and praise. God is so good.

I love being on the water. My mom used to have a boat and I can close my eyes and feel the joy and the peace that I felt when I would be sitting in the front of the boat and the wind was rushing all around me. I think about that experience and then I think about God and I give God praise and thanksgiving.

Last year my family went to Estes Park, Colorado for our summer vacation and we spent a morning hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park. We walked to Nymph, Dream and Emerald Lake. We walked to the end of the trail where there was a gorgeous lake and snow was on the mountains. It was 1.8 miles one way up and no one complained. It was a miracle. We stared at the majesty of the lake and the beauty all around us. The air was so clean and crisp and it was beautiful. We had this mountaintop moment, an experience where we saw God’s creation and we were in awe and then it started to rain. We quickly got out the rain ponchos and covered up and turned around to walk downhill for 1.8 miles. We walked fast because it was raining and I kept thinking about the majesty and the glory of God, and how quickly we turned to not praising God but paying attention to where our next step went so we didn’t fall down into the mud.

When we have an experience like that where we are filled with awe and wonder and praise for God, the moment often doesn’t last long before our attention goes somewhere else. That is what happened with Peter in our scripture for today. Peter and James and John have this amazing experience of Jesus and I love Peter’s response. He is overcome with wonder and awe and praise, “Master, this is a great moment,” and then he pivots away from wonder and awe and praise and focuses on what to do about it. We should remember this moment forever and build three memorials here, one for you Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah. I love how the Message translation says it, Peter is babbling. It is like he doesn’t know how to process the experience he had of Jesus’ majesty, so he starts babbling.

They are on the mountaintop and Moses and Elijah are there with Jesus. Moses had these amazing mountaintop moments in his life. Literally he was on Mount Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments from God. And then he took credit for water that was provided by God out of a rock, and Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land he had spent 40 years wandering in the dessert to get to. Moses experienced the highest high and the lowest low. Elijah faced down 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, and had this contest between God and Baal. Elijah said to the people, “How long will you hobble back and forth between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal.” And the people didn’t answer, so Elijah does this challenge of the sacrifices. The prophets of Baal prayed that Baal would send fire on their sacrifice and Elijah prayed that the Lord God would send fire on his sacrifice. The prophets of Baal received no answer. Elijah prays and the Lord God sends this fire that consumes the sacrifice and everything around it. And then Elijah kills all the 450 prophets of Baal.

Elijah has this great victory, this mountaintop moment when he feels God’s presence so strongly, but everyone isn’t happy about it. Queen Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah and Elijah is afraid. He doesn’t trust God, but he runs in terror and hides. He becomes so depressed he prays to God that he might die. It is then that we have this great story of Elijah hearing Lord God say to him to stand on the mountain before the Lord for the Lord is about to pass by. There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a sound of sheer silence. Elijah experiences God’s presence through the still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12).

God can come to us anywhere in any moment of our lives. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton had an epiphany on a busy corner in downtown Louisville in broad daylight. He wrote of his experience: “In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs—it was like waking from a dream of separateness . . . to take your place as a member of the human race. I had the immense joy of being man—a member of the race in which God became incarnate. If only everybody could realize this. But it cannot be explained—there is no way of telling people that they are all walking round shining like the sun.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Have you had an experience like that? If you have not, trust me - God is trying to bring that experience to you. Your job is to just listen. On a mountaintop, at a busy intersection, in the hospital, wherever you are. Just listen and know that the voice you hear is God's.

We never know when we are going to have a God moment like that. Tears may come as we listen to beautiful music, or as you experience art or walk around White Rock lake. God may speak to us through a dream or in a conversation with another person. The good news is that God’s Holy Spirit is free and wild, we only have to open ourselves up to that Spirit. In our scripture Peter wants to somehow hold onto the moment. He wants to build shrines to contain the Holy Spirit. And a voice comes from the cloud to remind Peter that the Holy Spirit dwells with us. “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.” Listen as Jesus gives us hope. Listen as Jesus tells us we are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We are God’s beloved. Listen as Jesus says the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor. The meek shall inherit the earth. Listen as Jesus says love your enemies. Do good to those who hurt you. Return to no one evil for evil. Love one another as I have loved you. Be a Good Samaritan. Listen as Jesus says those who seek to save their lives must lose them. Listen as Jesus tells us and shows us that through death comes resurrection.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The mountaintop moments are the stories that we tell again and again. They give us strength; they give us hope. Listen to Jesus. Listen to God’s words to us. You are my beloved, marked by my love, the focus of my delight. When the world seems crazy, look to Jesus and listen to him. Pay attention to what Jesus says and does, who Jesus reaches out to and who he gives his attention and help. And may we always remember the promise “Don’t be afraid.” That promise is throughout the Gospels. Do not be afraid. Our fears are different and they change throughout our life, but the promise remains. God is God of the past, present, and future, so do not fear. Do not be afraid. God is always with us.[[4]](#footnote-5) When we need to be reminded of God’s presence with us, may we experience God’s wonder and awe and may we praise God. Today, may we take the time to just listen. Amen.

1. Thanks to Rev. James Howell for the ideas in much of this paragraph and for the Sound of Music reference. http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2017/02/what-can-we-say-come-february-26.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Thomas Merton quotation found in this sermon: <http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/020716_8am.html>. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 140–142 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Much of this paragraph from http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/020716\_8am.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Much of this paragraph from http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/transfiguration-a-timely-words/?utm\_source=feedburner&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)