

Zion's UCC of Taborton
February 25, 2018
Rev. Konrad Raup

Mountain Paradise
Exodus 34: 29-35
1 Kings 19: 4-16
Mark 9: 2-10

One of the things we learn from today's readings is that when you interact with God, strange things can happen. Exodus says Moses spent 40 days without food or water. Of course, since all things are possible with God, that could be true, but 40 days is one of those symbolic numbers in the Bible that just means a long time. In the time of Noah it rained 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days. You get it. A long time. When you're reading the Bible, don't get all caught up in the details, they can lead you down false paths. These are legends. Legends that were written down many centuries after they happened. Wolf Blitzer wasn't there, microphone in his hand, camera crew behind, recording it all.

The point is that Moses was changed by his experience of God. His face was shining. He was so changed by the experience of God that the Hebrew people couldn't bear look at him. He had to veil his face. That still happens today. Most people do not like to be in the presence of the Holy. We don't match up well. We want there to be holy people, but they should veil themselves and make it easier on the rest of us. Those high school kids in Florida who are speaking out against assault rifles come to my mind. I'll bet many people, even in this congregation, would like to see them just go away. They are changed from what they were and it makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it?

Moses wasn't the only Old Testament figure to go up on a mountain and find God. Elijah, having been chased out of Jerusalem by death threats from the queen, went up onto Mt. Horeb and spoke with God. The part of this story I find most interesting is the way that the writer portrays God. God isn't in the thunder or the lightning. God isn't in the mighty wind. God is in the silence. That's another thing that makes us uncomfortable—silence. If I were to ask you to sit here in silence for 15 minutes, many of you would be twitching and sweating by the end. Most of us don't like silence.

So Jesus took Peter, James, and John, his best buds, and went up onto Mt. Tabor. What a name, huh? I think they stopped to have lunch with Don and Candylee on their way, but, somehow, that got left out of Mark's Gospel. When they arrived at the kipfel, the summit, Jesus was made dazzling white, like a Clorox commercial on steroids. Moses had been changed, and now, so was Jesus. Then, there was a cloud and things grew quiet and the voice of God spoke in the silence. Just as God had spoken to Elijah.

And, just to make sure that we understand those connections, both Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Jesus. Is it any wonder that Peter, James and John are scared out of their wits.

I know I would have been. When we get scared like that we want to do something. If you're active, you won't have time to think about how scared You really are. So, Peter asks Jesus for permission to build three huts. One for each of these Godly figures.

And now we're getting to the point of this whole episode. Marty Haugen, who wrote the words and music to the hymn *All Are Welcome* that we have sung several times recently, has also written a modern oratorio based on the Gospel of Mark called *The Song of Mark*. In it, Haugen has a song called *So Good to Be Here* that is a retelling of the transfiguration story. I won't sing it because it's a trio. I had thought about getting the three kings back together, but there just wasn't time. Maybe next year...

But, let me read some of the lyrics to you:

"It's so nice on the mountain of Tabor, no crosses to bear, no worries or care, and so peaceful to rest from our labor, it's so good to be here with Jesus.

From up here the Romans look tiny, from up here all our problems are small. All the world is wondrous and shiny, it's too much to take in it all.

It's so nice on the Mountain of Tabor, no Journey to make, no life to forsake, what a moment to treasure and savor, it's so good to be here with Jesus.

In these heights I feel so inspired, smell the air and just look at the views. We could set up camp and retire, just kick back and write the Good News

It's so nice on the mountain of Tabor, no people in need with faces to feed, when you've had it to here with your neighbor, it's so good to be here with Jesus.

Over there, could that be Elijah? Over there, is that Moses I see? Such lofty circles we move in, I can tell God's smiling at me.

It's so good to be here with Jesus, and Elijah, and Moses, and you guys."

I suspect that most of us can identify with at least some of those lyrics. We want to retreat into religion, looking down on the problems of the world from on high. We want to use our faith like Trump's border wall to keep all the sadness and messiness of life on other side. Peter, James and John had apparently forgotten about the other disciples and followers of Jesus waiting for them in the valley below. These three had their little paradise, the rest of them were on their own.

Instead of agreeing, Haugen then interprets Jesus' response to be:

“We must walk down the mountain to the path down below, there is no time to linger you have so far to go. Though the way may be weary and your spirits be low, walk on, walk on into the valley.”

A verse later he adds: “Now the sky turns to midnight in the valley below, soon the storm will be breaking and the fierce winds will blow, through the dark and the lightning lies the way you must go.”

As they begin plodding down the path toward the world below, the crowd below sings: “from the peace of the mountain to the trials down below, you are called now to labor, be the seeds God will sow, bring new hope, bring true healing to that world of woe”.

Both Mark and Mr. Haugen have proclaimed the meaning of our Christian faith. We are called to be in the world, even as we are not of the world.

After Moses was transformed on Mt. Sinai, he immediately came down the mountain to the people below.

After Elijah spoke with god on Mt. Horeb, he immediately came down the mountain and started back to Jerusalem.

When Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor, God said, listen to him. And what Jesus said was leave this place of peace and get back into the brokenness of the world.

As the disciples of Jesus, we are called, not to separate ourselves from the struggles of this life, but to engage them. None of us can have peace until all of have peace.

For me, the miracle of the transfiguration wasn't that Jesus was changed (Moses and Elijah had already done that). The true miracle of the transfiguration was that, having experienced that peaceful paradise, Jesus immediately came back down into our chaotic world. That, my friends, is a good lesson for all of us on this mountain to remember.