

Sunday, February 3rd, 2008
Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9
Mountaintop Encounters

When we talk about faith, we often talk about the mountaintop encounter or experience. We talk about those moments in which God seems to be more present, or closer, those high moments in faith as mountaintop experiences. In those moments, something seems to be different – about the world, about ourselves, about God, about how things look, and smell and sound and are. Those moments quite often define our own personal faiths, and if they don't define them, they profoundly inform our faiths. Part of the reason we talk about these encounters in those words is because of precisely what happens in our lessons today.

Moses goes up on top of the mountain, at God's request, for a personal meeting with the Almighty. The cloud that is the presence of God settles on top of the mountain and God and Moses have a heart to heart conversation. And on top of this mountain, God is to give Moses the stone tablets that contain the law of God. And that's a part of the story we know pretty well.

We also know that at the same time that Moses is up in the executive boardroom having a high level conference with God, the poorly named people of God are down at the foot of the mountain begging Moses' brother Aaron to make them a statue, an idol, something to worship. At the same time that Moses is on top of the mountain getting the tablets that contain the law of God which mandate that the people shall have no other gods before God Almighty, and that they shall make no images of anything on heaven or on earth. At the same time that God's law is being revealed, not for the first time I might add, the people of God, the people that God saved by taking them into Egypt in a time of famine, the people that God had saved by bringing them out of slavery in the land of Egypt and into this wilderness on their way to the promised land, those people of God are dishonoring their name and their calling and their most basic identity. As heaven comes down to earth, as God comes down to the top of the mountain, the people of God, earth, withdraws from the presence of heaven.

Later, in Matthew, we have another mountaintop encounter. Once again, God invites one of us to come up the mountain. This time it is Christ, who turns not to one of his followers, but to several, and invites them up the mountain. And once again, Moses is present. And once again, the clouds roll in. And once again, God speaks. Earth and heaven have drawn close to one another. The presence of God is revealed.

And once again, the world withdraws from the presence of heaven. We hear that withdrawal in the words of Peter. In Peter's proclamation that we should stay on top of the mountain and enjoy the presence of God, earth is withdrawing – both from heaven and from God and from earth and from one another. Peter's proclamation flies in the face of the very presence of Jesus on the planet. After all, the faith we embrace, the faith we proclaim, doesn't say that

Sunday, February 3rd, 2008
Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9
Mountaintop Encounters

Christ comes, that God comes to condemn the world, but that God comes to save the world. The very act of the incarnation of God's behalf should deny us the ability to use Peter's words and his sentiment to withdraw from the world. And God corrects Peter in the voice from the cloud. Simply by acknowledging what we hold to be true, simply by stating that Jesus is the Son of God, God is saying that if God can't just sit back and be comfortable, neither can the people of God.

And if these two encounters haven't said enough about what it means to have a friend in high places, then consider this one. A man, said by some to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, carries two heavy wooden beams down the streets of Jerusalem. He carries those beams up the hill called Calvary, to the place of the skull, known as Golgotha, and he is hoisted high on those pieces of wood. He is named the king of the Jews, ridiculed and dies. This moment, the moment in which the centurion says "Truly, this man was God's son," is another one of those moments when heaven and earth come together.

And where are the disciples, the people of God as this occurs? Where are they as a soldier of the empire testifies to the power and love of God? They are down off the hill, they are in the upper room, they are hiding and denying that they even know this man, this Galilean. Once again, earth withdraws from the touch of heaven.

The encounter on top of the mountain – the time when heaven and earth draw a bit closer together – should be the time for the two to draw together, for earth to more closely approach heaven. And yet time and time again, we withdraw from the reality that has been revealed to us by God on the mountaintop. Whether we are at the bottom with Aaron and the Israelites, giving up our gold earrings for an idol, or on top of the mountain and not having a clue what we're seeing, or whether we have left the foot of the cross because we don't know what is really happening, we are withdrawing from the presence of God. We are leaving behind who we are, and giving the lie to our identity as the people of God.

For us, for those of us who live in the shadow of the temple and the shadow of the mountains, we can't run away from the mountains. For on those mountains, and on the mountains of our lives, we have met God. We have seen the cloud that shows God's presence, and we have heard the voice of God. And on that hill, not quite a mountain, we know that the world has met God. And we stand, not with the disciples in places of denial and safety, but with the centurion at the foot of the cross, and we proclaim that this man was God's son.