

Sermon – Reassuring Touch
Scripture Readings – Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2014
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On this Transfiguration Sunday, our first scripture reading found in Exodus 24:12-18, recalls Moses coming into God's presence for 40 days on the top of Mount Sinai before leading the Hebrews on a 40 year sojourn through the wilderness to the Promised Land. As the church moves into Lent, the 40 days commemorating the number of years the Israelites journeyed and the number of days Christ spent in the wilderness, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God. The cloud makes everything about God mysterious, threatening and beyond reach. Moses goes where no one has ever gone and enters the very sphere of God. God wants God's presence to abide in the realm of the human, in the very life of Israel, however, for God to come here, Moses must go there! Hear now God's Holy word.

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 17:1-9. On this last Sunday before the season of Lent when the church remembers Jesus' suffering and death, the story of the transfiguration is a pledge to God's commitment to resurrection, to the promise that the various roads to Jerusalem that faithful disciples take will lead to life. The presence of Moses and Elijah on this mountain connects Jesus with a long history—a history of God's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, and of God's sending prophets to call people to grace. And so transfiguration is also a fulfillment of an ancient heritage. Once again the disciples remind us that being in the presence of God is not casual, but an awesome and terrifying experience. Hear now God's Holy word.

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The title of the sermon: *Reassuring Touch*

The text: But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' Matthew 17:7

Let us pray: Holy God, you encounter us on our journeys—up the mountain and into the wilderness. Thank you for reaching out to us, wherever we are, and easing our fears with your reassuring touch. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Martin Smith, a contemporary pastor and musician, takes the expression “No one can see God and live” to mean “No one can be touched by God and remain unchanged!”

Moses certainly was changed by his experience with Yahweh on Mount Sinai, an experience that was both terrifying and exhilarating. An experience that transformed and empowered Moses for the journey into the wilderness that would last 40 years! Moses didn't come off that mountain alone! He brought the tablets of stone with him and he brought the spirit of Yahweh...sustaining the Israelite community with a reassuring touch on their journey through the wilderness into the Promised Land.

Matthew often links the stories of Jesus with allusions from Hebrew Scriptures. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus echoes the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. Both are encounters with God on a cloud-covered mountaintop; in both, God's voice is heard from within the covering cloud. Jesus' face shines as Moses' did on his descent. And perhaps most poignantly; in both, being in the presence of God is not casual, but an awesome and terrifying experience.

Peter, John and James, who have the privilege of witnessing the transformation of Jesus on this mountaintop and who later become major figures in the early church, we are told, when they heard the voice of God, *they fell on the ground and were overcome with fear.*

It is Jesus' response to their fear that is striking in this powerful story. *But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'* Neither Peter nor his two friends are judged or berated for their fear and uncertainty. When the cloud and the voice terrify them, Jesus does what he has done, time and time again in his ministry... to the leper, to Peter's mother-in-law, to the two blind men, to the woman who is hemorrhaging —Jesus touches them and then he speaks words of reassurance. It is another of the countless vignettes in the scriptures of incredible grace and of divine patience shown to humanity. It speaks to the loving kindness and mercy of the God who is willing to embrace us in all our peculiarities and foibles, the God who is willing to touch our lives and reassure us on our particular journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land!

Every four years the Kieffers enjoy watching the Winter Olympics and this year was no exception. The grace, agility and strength of the skiers as they fly down the mountain takes one's breath away. A few years ago, while skiing in Lake Tahoe, a sign caught my eye, which read “The Promised Land.” Right next to the proclamation was a large black diamond – indicating that this was an expert or most difficult run.

It was a poignant moment for me not because I was tempted to find my way to that particular Promised Land down a black diamond ski slope but because that sign captured the truth about our faith.

The children of Israel were not told that their journey into the wilderness would be without risks. Peter, James and John came down that mountain aware that suffering would be a part of Jesus' journey and theirs as well if they chose to follow him. Something they did not want to hear!

The Promised Land always lies on the other side of a wilderness.

None of us is able to participate on our spiritual journey without loss and risk. None of us is able to reach the Promised Land without going through the wilderness or choose to journey with Jesus without making sacrifices along the way.

I paused for a moment on that mountain to thank God for the beauty surrounding me and for the richness of our faith that, without apology, announces that the Promised Land is an expert or most difficult run. We are surrounded with the strength of our faith community, and yet we are called individually into the wilderness toward spiritual maturity. The way is never easy, we know the reassuring touch and presence of our Savior; however we can only count on ourselves to get down that mountain.

The first step on that journey to the Promised Land is a willingness to depart from our securities; to risk in the adventure of faith. Walter Brueggemann suggests:

Such departure from securities is the only way out of the wilderness. The story of our faith is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain empty; to leave in risk is to have hope. This is echoed in the invitation of Jesus: 'For whoever would save one's life will lose it; and whoever loses one's life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.'

The second step on that journey to the Promised Land is a willingness to be honest about ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives and our choices. The second step is personal accountability. This is sometimes called *a willingness to be confessional*. *We must give up the search for someone else to blame...It has been said that in generations past we went to a priest to confess our sins, but in our generation we go to a therapist to confess our parents' sins.*

Sometimes we need to confess our parents' sins and sometimes others are to blame. However, a healthy spirituality will be able to make these distinctions so that healing can take place and personal responsibility can grow. With a reassuring touch from the One who loves us, we can acknowledge we are who we are today as a result of our own choices. This honesty and self-reflection frees us up to make new choices to follow Jesus in the way of the wilderness.

William McElvaney in [The Saving Possibility: A Contemporary Refocusing of the Christian Message](#) reflects on the Way of the Wilderness with these thoughts

...the way of the wilderness is the way of the unknown and the unmapped...it is always toward maturity, risk, discovery of self, responsible use of freedom...In the wilderness we have only one thing going for us and that is God's promise that God will sustain us and lead us and guide us...In the wilderness God's promise is our only guarantee. When we learn again and again to rely on that promise, a strange thing happens. The wilderness isn't the wilderness anymore. The wilderness has become the Promised Land.

The psalmist proclaims: (Psalm 121)

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

No one can see God, no one can be touched by God, and remain unchanged! Amen.