

**Sermon: High & Holy**

New North Church, Hingham

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23 February 2020

Based on **Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9**

The lectionary is getting us ready for Lent in what almost seems like a set-up. Jesus' last words in today's reading foreshadow things that we will hear about over the next five weeks or so. And, if we dig in a bit deeper, we can uncover some other tidbits that might enhance our understanding of the Jesus story.

But first, let's check our own context for a minute. Let's start with today and work our way back.

Both of today's passages have an element of witness to them. The people of Israel and Peter, James, and his brother John have all seen something special, and what they saw changed them forever. Now, we are far from being eyewitnesses to these events; we only have Scripture to guide us. We can't help it; it's why we read Scripture in the first place.

The problem is that sometimes, we are not attentive to what we cannot see for ourselves. We read these stories, we think about them, reflect on them, but maybe they don't sink in the way they would if we had witnessed them for ourselves.

Case in point: our daughter is almost 25 years old now. When she heard the story about Bill Buckner in the 1986 World Series, she thought, wow, that's too bad. But there was no way she could ever feel what I felt when I watched that ball go through Buckner's legs. There's no way to convey that horror or to make her feel all the emotions that rippled across New England on that fateful day. We might never get over it.

So how can we understand how awesome, how terrifying, it must have been for the people of Israel to witness the appearance of the glory of the Lord like a devouring, *consuming*, fire on the top of the mountain? If the voice from the cloud spoke to us the way it spoke to the disciples, would we also be overcome with fear? As he watched Moses enter the cloud and go up the mountain, Joshua must have thought, 'Well, that's that, I'll never see him again.'

Moses stayed in the cloud for forty days and forty nights, but he did come down again. What is interesting is *why* he went up – to get the Law and the commandments, written by God on tablets of stone. And I say interesting because the people already knew the Law and they already knew the commandments.

In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Moses read the Law to the people not once, but twice, and then the entire nation participated in a *covenant ritual*.

It went something like this, beginning with verse 3:

Moses came and *told* the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.'<sup>4</sup> And Moses *wrote down* all the words of the LORD.

Then Moses rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Then he sent young men of the people of Israel to offer burnt-offerings and to sacrifice oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> Then Moses took half of the oxen blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.<sup>7</sup> Then he took *the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people*; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'

And here is the best part:

<sup>8</sup> Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, 'See *the blood of the covenant* that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

'The blood of the covenant.' We've heard that before. The blood of the covenant seals the deal. In Luke, chapter 22, at the last earthly meal he would share with his followers, Jesus said, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the *new* covenant in my blood.' It's 'new' because the wine shared at the Last Supper now symbolizes the oxen blood shed at the foot of the mountain when the entire nation agreed to live according to God's Law. That first covenant is still in effect. Remember, Jesus said, 'I have come not to abolish but to fulfill' the Law (Matthew 5:17).

Matthew tells a similar story about Jesus going up a high mountain where he was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. And then Moses and Elijah appeared beside Jesus and they engaged in conversation. Why Moses and Elijah? Why not some other prophets, like Isaiah and Ezekiel?

Here are the last verses in the Hebrew Bible, from the Book of Malachi:

Remember the teaching of my servant *Moses*,  
the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.  
Lo, I will send you the prophet *Elijah* before the great and terrible day of  
the LORD comes (Malachi 4:4-5).

This is the promise of the second coming of Elijah.

And here are the first words in the Christian Gospels, following immediately after Malachi: ‘An account of the genealogy of *Jesus the Messiah*, the son of David, the son of Abraham.’ If he is the Messiah, then Jesus represents the second coming of Elijah. So, putting them together on the mountain, with Jesus’ divinity being revealed in such a dramatic way, separates them, and highlights Jesus as the hope and light of the world.

And Jesus telling Peter, James, and John to keep quiet about what they saw ‘until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’ anticipates the Resurrection, which is why I said earlier that the lectionary was setting us up.

I also said that sometimes, we are not attentive to what we cannot see for ourselves. Someone had to tell Matthew what they saw and heard on the mountain, and my money is on Peter.

His second letter includes a section in which he defends the prophecy of Jesus’ expected return. Peter wrote, ‘we did not follow cleverly devised myths [...] but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty’ (2 Peter 1:16). Also, ‘We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.’ (1:18-19a). He goes on to say that no prophecy in Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation because all prophecy comes to women and men through the ‘Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (1:20-21).

And when Peter, James, and John heard God speak, they were understandably overcome with fear and they fell to the ground until Jesus came over and touched them, saying, ‘Do not be afraid.’ As Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, so placing his hand on the disciples is actually God’s hand, and it’s a caring, reassuring hand.

For the first time in a long time, the Sea of Galilee is full. This is a sign of God’s blessing, and there is joy in every shore town around the lake.

We only mention that, first, because it’s good news, but it also signifies that it is in Creation where we see evidence of God at work. We don’t need Scripture to tell us that God is on the loose; we can see it for ourselves.

But Scripture does tell us that we can't build God a monument; that we can't contain God within the walls of a church or on the slopes of a high and holy mountain. If Scripture didn't tell us that, we might eventually figure it out on our own.

We also know from both Scripture and experience that we can't escape God; we can't hide from God's light. God will find us when our hearts are broken and when they are filled with joy. God will find us in the middle of whatever hell it is that we happen to find ourselves in. And just as God is too great to be contained in the bread or in the cup, we can also find God in a single bread crumb and in the barest sip of wine, or even in a bowl of soup.

As Jesus said, 'Get up and do not be afraid,' for God is with us.

Amen.