

A LAMP SHINING IN A DARK PLACE

MATTHEW 17:1-9; 2 PETER 1:16-21
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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This week I encountered two unflattering but apparently unavoidable truths about the nature of preaching.

First, I came across an article from a colleague that said that most preachers only have two or three sermons. We have different ways of saying things of course, and we seem to find different ways to get to these same two conclusions.

But most of us circle back to the same two or three themes over and over again (in my colleague's case, his two sermons were: "trust God" and "love each other").

The second apparent truth about preaching has been gleaned from conversations with you and others throughout my nearly nine years of being a pastor and it is perhaps even less flattering. Despite the fact that most preachers only have two or three sermons, evidently those two or three sermons are not very memorable.

I've occasionally remarked to people during a busy week or a stressful season in the church year or a time when I'm not feeling particularly creative that I'm contemplating using an old sermon. People usually say something like "Oh just use it again; I don't think anyone would even notice that it wasn't a new one!"

(So, after encountering these two truths about preaching this week, I promptly said a prayer of gratitude to God for providing me with this opportunity to learn humility.)

I'm going to test these theories this morning. I have preached a portion of this sermon before, on Transfiguration Sunday, 2014. But as I reread it this week, I thought that parts of it are exactly what I want to say on Transfiguration Sunday 2017.

Some of it will be new (in the sense that I wrote it this week), but there will almost certainly be nothing I say this morning that I haven't said before.

But even though I've said it before, it's what I want you to hear at the outset of Lent.

It's what I need to be told, here at the outset of Lent, 2017.

As Christians, we have a tendency to make God very big or very small.

The bigness of God is easy to think of. Wander outside during a clear, starry night. Hike to the top of a mountain. Walk along a beach. Go skiing or snowshoeing. Go sailing out on a lake or an ocean. Go for a walk in the coulees.

There are times when the grandeur and the beauty of what God has made can be breathtaking.

But it's not just the majesty of creation *out there* that makes us think of the bigness of God.

When we think about the mystery of existence itself—how it is that there should be such a thing as human beings, how it is that we there should be such a thing as brains that process a never-ending stream of data from nerves running throughout our bodies, that connect to arms and legs and fingers and toes, how it is that there could be such a thing as *consciousness* where electric impulses in our brains somehow lead to *thoughts* that seem to exist outside of our bodies, that these thoughts could correspond with what is real and true in the world...

It's incredible.

All of this (and more), we believe, is of God.

And yet, at the same time we can often think of God in very small terms as well.

We think of God as our friend. We talk to God. We imagine that God is interested in the everyday details of our lives.

We ask God to help us have a good day or enjoy our holiday. We ask for help in writing an exam or managing our pain. We ask God to bless our food.

We invite God into the mundane and human parts of our lives because we believe that God is interested in this, too.

I'm sure some of us have even come across people or situations where it seemed like people were treating God in terms that were even a little *too* familiar. People who thank God for everything from securing a good parking spot to getting a bit of extra money back on their taxes.

Perhaps we have on occasion cringed at the expression "thank God" for things that we were quite certain were too trivial to warrant divine attention ☺.

So, we often go back and forth between big and small, between awe and intimacy, between reverence and familiarity in our understanding of God.

The ancient Hebrews were not generally this schizophrenic. They mostly had a pretty big God.

Their God was the creator of all that was. Their God was the initiator of a covenant and they were his people. Their job was to fear the Lord and to obey.

There was emotional intimacy with this God—the Psalms make this clear.

But generally in the Hebrew worldview, Yahweh was a God of holiness, a God of justice and truth and wrath. A God to be approached with reverent fear.

We see this in our text today.

Jesus brings Peter, James and John up on a mountain. While there, Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes—his appearance becomes one of brilliant whiteness.

And then, they see Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith—right there beside him!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Most scholars agree that Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, thus linking Jesus to the story of Israel and of these two massive figures.

They also point to Jesus' dazzling whiteness, saying that this symbolizes the fact that Jesus was a prophet unlike any other—***that God was speaking in an utterly unique and unprecedented way through him.***

In addition, the words God speaks from the cloud almost exactly mirrors the divine speech at Jesus' baptism: This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased" and then adds, "*Listen to him!*"

And what is the disciples' response? Matthew 17:6:

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

They were overcome with fear.

They knew that they were on holy ground.

They had been raised in a tradition which said that no one could see God and live. They had been raised with the stories of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai and speaking to God on behalf of the people, because the people believed that if God spoke to them directly, they would die (Exodus 20:18-19).

They had heard the stories of God overwhelming Job out of the whirlwind, taking him on a tour of creation, asking him, "Where were you when I did all of this? Do you presume to question me?!"

They had images of God leading his people with pillars of fire and clouds in the desert.

They knew that their God was very big.

And so they were, quite rightly, terrified.

But it's fascinating to observe what comes next in the story. How does Jesus respond?

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."
(Matthew 17:7)

Jesus *touched* them, and told them not to be afraid.

Just like he touched people throughout his ministry—dirty people, unclean people, sinful people, the wrong sorts of people... just like he set people free from a religious and political system based on fear and exclusion... now, at this moment when his divine identity is again revealed in a unprecedented way, he shows that he is a prophet like no other.

Jesus demonstrated that, while he was indeed God's special anointed one—in a way that was far superior to Moses and Elijah, in a way that was the culmination of Israel's entire story—he was also their friend and their brother.

Jesus does not want his disciples (or us) to see only a glowing white figure on top of a mountain, but also one who reaches over and touches quivering and quaking human beings and tells them not to be afraid.

The God who is very big is also small enough to touch us.

The Christ who Scripture tells us is the one through whom and for whom everything has been created (Colossians 1:16), is the one who says, "It's ok, get up. Don't be scared."

We arrive here at one of the deep mysteries that runs throughout the Christian faith: Apparent opposites exist together.

Divinity and humanity.

Strength and weakness.

Wisdom and foolishness.

Transcendence and immanence.

Bigness and smallness.

The God who made the marvels that take your breath away is also the God who reaches out his hand to you, *personally*, and says, “You don’t need to be afraid.

The God who flung the stars in the sky is the God who knows you more deeply than any other person, who loves you and who has called you by name.

The one who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16) is the one who enters the darkness of the human condition, into the darkness of our own stories and brings light and life.

This is both comforting and challenging.

It is comforting because we don’t have to think of God as some unapproachably remote creator who is distant from the affairs of ordinary human beings—that the God of the universe reaches out to us.

It is challenging because we don’t have the *luxury* of thinking about God as an unapproachably remote creator who is distant from the affairs of ordinary human beings.

Many people today would prefer an uninvolved God who we can thank for the marvels of creation and then move on with our lives. Many people are glad to believe in a kind of vague “higher power” to account for the sense of wonder that we sometimes experience, but have little desire to actually consider whether this higher power might have a claim on their lives.

Jesus doesn’t give us this option. The one who reaches out his hand and tells us not to be afraid is also the one of whom God the Father says, ***listen to him***. Do what he says. Follow him.

Attend to him.

In our reading from 2 Peter we heard these words:

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. **You will do well to be attentive to this** as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

You will do well to be attentive to this.

This is the task of the church. This is the goal of the Christian life. This is the nature of Christian faith.

To be attentive to this one who sums up all of the law and the prophets, this one in whom the fullness of God's nature and expression is said to dwell and be expressed.

To be attentive to how God has made himself known in this dark and hurting world.

To be attentive to the God who is big enough to be the author of the story of the world and small enough to enter into it.

We do well to be attentive to how God has spoken and what God has said in Jesus Christ, and how we have experienced this in our own lives, **particularly when our own dark times come, as they inevitably will.**

There are moments in our lives where God seems very near. Perhaps they take place when we are out in the majesty of creation. Perhaps they come in moments of prayer or meditation where we sense God's nearness and abiding presence.

Maybe we have an experience in our lives where we follow the teaching of Jesus and we feel an unspeakable peace. Maybe we are overwhelmed by the experience of love and we know intuitively that this is indeed what we have been created for.

Maybe it is a time when we have collapsed into a forgiveness and mercy that we know we don't deserve but which we receive with gratitude.

I think there are moments in most of our lives where the meaning of life and the presence of God seem clear and obvious and exhilarating.

I have had these moments.

But we all know that there are other moments, too. Moments when we come down from the mountaintop and encounter a mixed up and messy world.

We encounter seasons when life can seem like a drudgery. Seasons when our experience seems gray and mundane and uninspiring. Times when God seems remote, hard to reach, silent.

Times when our experience is characterized by ambiguity and confusion, not clarity and conviction. Times when the injustices of the world seems too much to bear.

And, of course, we all go through seasons of suffering and pain. And we wonder, “Where is God in the midst of all this?”

Well, the short answer is, “God is right there, in the darkness.”

Only a few verses after this passage, when Jesus and his disciples have descended from the mountain, we read these words:

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.” And the disciples were filled with grief.

This revelation of who Jesus is on the mountaintop does not lead to his *avoiding* suffering but entering into it, exposing it, and shining the light of God’s truth in the midst of it.

The same is true for those of us who follow him.

It is when the darkness comes (as it inevitably will) that we most need to heed the words of 1 Peter.

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place.

Be attentive to Jesus Christ—the one who manifests the bigness and smallness of God. The one who is the image of the invisible God *and* the one who reaches out and says, “Don’t be afraid. I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

Be attentive to the one who modeled what a life of faith, hope, and love look like in good times and bad, in the midst of both light and darkness.

We do well to keep this vision of Christ before us at all times. Because we all need a vision by which to live our lives, and we all attend to something.

When the church stops attending to Christ, we become less than we are called to be. We can even find ourselves actively working *against* God's purposes in the world. Church history is regrettably full of examples of what happens when we stop attending to Jesus.

When we as individuals stop attending to Christ, we become less than we are called to be. We can start to live on autopilot, assuming that God is just kind of there in the background while we mostly do what we want, living lives mostly on our own terms.

We do not become what we were made to be automatically. We need to attend the one revealed on the mountaintop in our own lives, through prayer, meditation, Scripture.

This takes discipline and patience. It takes practice.

It is very easy to be inattentive to Jesus and to his teaching as we make our way in the world. It is very easy to ignore the divine command that rang in Peter, James, and John's ears on the mountaintop: *listen to him*.

So we do well to be attentive to Christ, throughout all the seasons of our lives.

And when we live lives that are attentive to Jesus and his way, we become that lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in our hearts. Until Christ comes again.

May we attend well to Jesus. And may we shine to illuminate the darkness.

Amen.

