

DO NOT BE AFRAID

MATTHEW 17:1-9

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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As Christians, we have a tendency to make God very, very big or very, 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 or go sailing out on a lake or an ocean.

If you spend any time whatsoever in creation, you will know that there are times when the grandeur and the beauty of what God has made can overwhelm you.

Last night Claire and I were driving back from a swim meet in High River and the sun was setting over the mountains on a frigid winter day. There were shafts of light heading off into all kinds of angles with little white flecks of clouds interspersed throughout. It was beautiful!

Claire said, “Sometimes I’m amazed at how creative God is.” I couldn’t agree more.

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...

It’s incredible.

Many philosophers and theologians have traditionally identified the quest for God with the quest for the *good*, the *true*, and the *beautiful*. In the deepest parts of who we are we

know that these three things—goodness, truth, and beauty—are real and are not just expressions of what we happen to prefer.

All of this, we believe, is of God. God is both immanent and transcendent. Traces of God and God’s attributes can be seen all around us and even with us. At the same time, God is completely separate from the created order. God stands *over* all that he has made, supporting and sustaining the entire cosmos at every moment.

As Paul puts it in the book of Acts, “God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

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. Many Christians talk about God as if he were something like an imaginary friend.

We ask God to help us have a good day or enjoy our holiday. We ask for help in writing an exam or preparing a sermon ☺.

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 or getting a bit of extra money back on their taxes or whatever.

I’m sure many of us have heard the expression “thank God” for things that we were quite certain were too trivial to warrant divine attention ☺.

We often go back and forth. Our understanding of the size and complexity of the universe has grown immensely over the years and we are awestruck at the God who could do this.

And yet, at times it seems that we have lost something of the reverence and holy fear that our ancestors had for God. Sometimes, we give the impression that God’s interests start and stop with us.

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 very clear.

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

We see this in our text today.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and our text focuses on a unique experience in the life of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus brings Peter, James and John up on a mountain.

While there, Jesus is transfigured before their very eyes.

Not only is Jesus' appearance transformed into one of brilliant whiteness, but they see Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith—right there beside him!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Many scholars are of the opinion that Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, thus linking Jesus to the story of Israel and of these two massive figures, but also saying, by virtue of his dazzling whiteness, 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 fearful, 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 unique way, he shows that he is a God 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, indeed, the culmination of Israel’s entire story—he was also their friend and their brother.

There is a temptation to look at events like the Transfiguration or any other miraculous event in the gospels (healings, exorcisms, Jesus baptism, the Incarnation and Resurrection themselves) as something like really powerful proofs that Jesus is divine—almost like magic tricks that prove how powerful Jesus is, that he comes with God’s special stamp of approval.

But we must not stop with the miraculous nature of some of these stories.

Jesus does not want us to see simply 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 who and for whom everything that exists has been made (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.

Transcendence and immanence.

Bigness and smallness exist together. 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.

I like how Patrick Willson puts it in his commentary on this passage:

God’s glory and magnificence and power are unsurpassable, we say; but we must also declare that God’s glory and magnificence and power and majesty are surpassed by God’s willingness to shed them all in order that we might finally recognize God’s love and gentleness. The measureless power that made the heavens and the earth concentrates in a hand reaching out to us.¹

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. 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 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.

Our only response can be to worship this big God who is small enough to reach out to us *and* to do what he says.

¹ Patrick J. Willson, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 457.

Which brings us to the Lord's table.

Before we get to that, let's sing together a song of response.

