

## FACE TO FACE WITH GOD'S GLORY

### MATTHEW 17: 1-9

As we turn to our Gospel reading for this morning,  
we must begin by acknowledging that there is a lot going on  
in these few verses;  
much of the detail in this reading  
points us back to the Hebrew Scriptures  
—and especially the story of Moses and the Exodus—  
and speaks to us of the encounters  
between God and God's people  
& the manifestations  
of God's glory.

It is good for us to know this  
as we begin this exploration of the text,  
because these echoes of the presence of God  
would have certainly been in the minds of the first Christian community  
as they read Matthew's gospel.

It is easy for us to see the parallels in the two texts that Phyllis read for us this morning:  
the one from Exodus 24  
and the other Matthew 17.

Throughout Scripture mountains are pretty much universally acknowledged  
as what the celtic tradition refers to as “thin places”:  
places where heaven and earth seem to touch  
and therefore they are special places of revelation.

On several occasions throughout the Book of Exodus  
Moses meets with God on the mountaintop.  
Each time Moses' call is confirm  
or God gives to Moses some new revelation.

This is the event that happens in today's Exodus reading.  
Moses is summoned to the mountaintop to receive the 10 Commandments.  
While Moses is there,

Scripture records that the glory of the Lord covered the mountain  
like a fiery cloud.

And when Moses emerges after the 40 days  
the visage of his face had changed.

As a result of having come face to face with God's glory,  
Moses' face shone

and Moses found it necessary to cover his face from the people.

(That last part is not in the reading we have heard this morning,  
but follows upon it).

In our Gospel reading,

Matthew begins by noting that once Jesus and the disciples had climbed the  
mountain

that Jesus appearance was transfigured;

that he in some way his nature and appearance had changed

His face shone and his clothing became dazzling white.

On the mountain Jesus meets with two great figures of Jewish history:

Moses and Elijah.

Both were renowned because of the things that they had done in their lives,  
but more importantly,

they were seen as precursors of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of Heaven,

because it was reputed that neither man had died.

Elijah, scripture reports,

was taken bodily into heaven in a flaming chariot;

and Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land with children of God.

And so when the Jewish people crossed the Jordan River to occupy the land

Moses remained on the other side.

No one recorded his death

and his gravesite is not known.

This gave way to a tradition in Jewish history  
that Moses had indeed never died  
but that this man,  
who had been given the privilege to see God,  
was taken into heaven by God.

All of these things taken together speak to us of this unavoidable reality:  
that Jesus and his disciples are standing in the precinct of the divine;  
that they have come face to face with the glory of God.

And indeed God even speaks to them.

With words reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus  
that we celebrated here not two months ago,  
as Peter and James and John struggle with the significance of these events  
God speaks from the cloud, saying:  
"This is my Son, the Beloved;  
with him I am well pleased;  
listen to him!"

Indeed, I think it may be fair to say  
that each of us struggles with the reality of the glory  
– the divinity –  
of the divine;  
and each of us probably stands in need to his correction.

Peter wishes to say frozen in this moment of glory.  
He offers to make three dwellings there in that place  
on the top of the mountain  
– one for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus –  
that they may bask the glory of God.

But Jesus' mission is in this earth,  
and still lies before him.

Our Gospel reading  
begins with the words  
“Six days later”.

Indicating that this text is bound with what comes before it.

What comes before is Jesus first prediction  
that he must go to Jerusalem  
and suffer and die upon the cross.

And if you recall the story,  
Peter wants nothing to do it.  
He rejects the idea that his teacher and friend should suffer.

For the Church there is always this pull between the two persons of Jesus:  
Jesus the great teacher,  
who went about doing good  
and opening up people’s minds to image the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus the Christ,  
the very Son of God,  
who comes to save the world from our sins  
and fit us for heaven.

But neither is sufficient unto itself.  
Jesus was indeed a great teacher,  
but his teachings alone could not win our salvation.  
Jesus, the Son of God,  
ascended and enthroned in heaven,  
cannot be the sole focus of our faith.

Our faith can never linger on the mountaintop  
or simply be some concern about the great beyond.

Christ’s saving work  
took place on earth.

As much as Peter longed to avoid the suffering that was to come,  
as much as Peter longed to stay on the mountain top  
and bask in the glory of God;  
Jesus and his disciples had to return.  
The work of God takes place in this world.

As we turn the page of the liturgical calendar  
and prepare our sanctuary and our hearts for the season of Lent  
– which begins this week –  
and Jesus slow and inexorable journey toward Jerusalem  
and his death;

We too are called to abandon the mountaintop  
to walk the earth with friends and strangers alike  
bearing witness to what we have glimpsed.

That Jesus Christ has come into this world  
to open our hearts in love and kindness to others  
bearing the good news of the Kingdom of God.

That God walks among us  
and seeks to deliver us  
from all those things that deny our humanity  
and get in the way of the inbreaking of God's glory.