

Sermon for the Last Sunday After the Epiphany

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Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio

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Waiting, Listening, Surrendering: Where All Becomes Holy

With this Sunday, the Last Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany, we, like Moses last week who stood facing into his mortality and on the threshold of the Promised Land, find ourselves occupying a similar place. This Sunday, also referred to as “Transfiguration Sunday,” we ascend the holy mountains in the company of the prophets of God, in the person of Moses and those he chooses to accompany him in our first reading from the Book of Exodus to where he receives the tablets of the Ten Commandments directly from God. It is clear from the beginning of the text that God has initiated this meeting on God’s terms for the express purpose of giving over the Ten Commandments as God’s holy law for God’s holy people.

The urgency of this meeting is palpable. And so is the drama heightened by what must have been a terrifying invitation extended to Moses by God. I can almost hear the rapid heartbeat of Moses as he prepares for such a meeting. You see, according to Jewish understanding, no one ever survived a face to face meeting with God. Such a meeting always ended in certain death. So, this invitation was not to be taken lightly. This is a dangerous expedition. Moses does not go alone. He takes Joshua with him, the heir to his leadership of the people of Israel; and he takes the elders with him, seventy of them who constitute the influential leaders of the people, perhaps the trusted leaders of several tribes. As the narrative advances, however, neither Joshua nor the elders can accompany Moses all the way to the place where he will meet God.

We are led to an awesome moment when God makes God’s own self fully present to Israel, to the chosen of God. God’s self-giving in this moment is intense in its divine power and divine intention. Pay close attention to what is and is not happening in this scene. The splendor of God is hidden and inscrutable. And there is the cloud. The cloud makes everything about God mysterious, awesome, and veiled out of sight. The blinding light of God must be veiled and God’s holiness and transcendence are never fully revealed.

So Moses waits on God. He waits in utter silence for six days. Moses waits upon God until God decides to act. On the seventh day, after a wait appropriate to God’s honor and glory, there is a voice. It is a voice coming issuing forth from the cloud. The Holy One calls to Moses, addresses him, and summons him to come forward. And what is described is awesome:

The glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

What must it have been like for Moses to enter that awesome cloud? To obey the direction of God and enter God's presence, alone. What we are told is that all the people of Israel could witness the light like a "devouring fire." What must they have thought as well? Later in the Book of Deuteronomy there is a reference to this moment...

"You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; ... there was only a voice."

We are not told about the conversation between God and Moses. And we are not told of Moses' response. What we know in that moment is that Moses has indeed met God and from that very moment forward nothing about life would ever be the same.

What Moses received from God were laws regarding every relationship, every daily encounter, every decision, every everything the people of God would experience in the mundane of every day living. These laws given by God were to re-order every aspect of life, a moral life of community of people whose lives were to be lived in a sacred covenant with the Creator of life in all its diverse forms. Nothing, no thing, no one was excluded from this holy covenant before God.

It seems to me that we are much like those people of Israel who see from a distance a devouring fire that is the glory of God while we live, or so we think, at some distance from God's presence. We, like those Israelites can then somehow make our own excuses for our lack of attentiveness, our misuse and abuse of relationships we so often take for granted and the resistance if not downright refusal to live an ordered moral life commanded by God in which equity, harmony, peace, justice, dignity, respect, and love are foundational to all moral decision-making. As another commentator wrote:

Suddenly we are startled by the mystical in the midst of the mundane- the awesome amid the ordinary, the breathtaking amidst the boring. ((Feasting on the Word, A. McSween)

God, in God's own mysterious and loving ways, breaks into our seemingly mundane lives and brings healing, hope, peace, perseverance and presence, if we are but attentive, and expectant, ourselves.

How does the living God break into the daily and mundane of your life? In what unexpected places, and through what unexpected people have you come face to face with the mystery and power of God to make all things holy?

My friends, we began the season of Epiphany with Jesus's baptism by John at the River Jordan, hearing the voice of God coming from a cloud and declaring, *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."* And now, as a sacred bookend to this holy season, we conclude the season of Epiphany with yet another experience of theophany, of God's voice breaking through the cloud on the Mount of the Transfiguration, as we hear, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him."*

The text from Matthew's gospel offers us one more epiphany ... before we cross the holy threshold to the season of Lent. We have heard of Jesus' belovedness and the declaration of our own belovedness before God as sons and daughters as the waters of holy baptism were poured over our heads. And as the priest makes the sign of the cross on our foreheads with the chrism and says "I seal you with the Holy Spirit and mark you as Christ's own, forever."

Let's be honest. In the crazy, frenetic, demanding and overly agended lives, we can not only forget our belovedness, we can come to even deny it. Today, however, in God's own voice we hear the pronouncement once again, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased..." AND God adds these words as a commandment... "Listen to him." *Waiting, listening, and surrendering are holy movements.*

In the midst of the mundane we will find the mysterious presence of God dwelling within and among us. In the midst of the cacophony of voices and distractions, that still small voice of God calls our names and transforms our lives, if we but *listen and surrender.*

Today (at our 10:30am service,) we will baptize Barbara Kenneady, beloved daughter of God, who indeed listened and surrendered to the invitation to be united with Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. Let us today, like Moses, wait upon God to do for us only what God alone can do. *In the waiting, let us listen.* And when we hear God's voice beckoning us to come closer, may we, even like those fearful disciples, *surrender* to the transfiguring touch of God in Jesus Christ. God's self-giving, inviting nothing less than our self-giving wherein *Mystery meets mundane and all becomes holy.*