

Exodus 24:12-18

12 The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them,

“Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

WHY PETER, JAMES, AND JOHN

Why did Jesus take Peter, James and John up a high mountain and leave the other disciples in the valley? What was it about these three disciples that caused Jesus to pick them over the others?

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Every time I've discussed this passage with people the answer is the same. These three were the inner circle of the disciples. They were the leaders, and therefore they needed the encouragement of the mountain top experience to see them through to the cross and beyond.

I do think that Peter, James and John were the leaders among the disciples. Peter was the first one who said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and it was upon that "rock," that statement of faith that the church was built.

James and John, the sons of thunder were well named for their courage and their impulsive desire to be in charge. After all it was James and John who wanted to be on Jesus' right and left in glory.

And that's why they and Peter made the trek up the mountain, to be with Jesus in his glory. They need that vision.

JESUS AND FEAR

But, as it often happens, the glory of God was not what they expected. This was not like going to church camp, climbing up to a beautiful lookout and singing benign songs around the glow of the campfire.

This mountain was a mountain filled with fear and dread. And I have come to believe that those who dare to follow Jesus and lead God's people should be filled with fear and dread as well.

Did you ever notice how often the presence of Jesus didn't lessen the anxiety of the people who met him? On the contrary the presence and actions of Jesus made people afraid. And this was especially true of his disciples.

Let me give you some examples.

Once Jesus gave his disciples some help after a night of fishing with no luck. He has them cast their net on the other side of the boat. They catch a tremendous amount of fish, so much that the boat begins to sink. And what is their emotion? They are afraid.

When Jesus calms the wind and the waves to save his disciples from the storm, what is their emotion? They are afraid. When the tomb is empty on Easter what is the emotion that the women feel? They are afraid.

Again and again Jesus had to tell his disciples, "Don't be afraid."

Why did Jesus say that so often? He said that because his disciples were often afraid as they sought to follow him.

In fact often the disciples were afraid of Jesus. Who was this man who could heal the sick, raise the dead, and tame the wind and the waves?

THE AGE OF ANXIETY

When it comes to fear, we can relate. We know what it means to be afraid. We live in a time of great fear. Someone has even dubbed our age the “age of anxiety.”

We can certainly understand why. I wish you could have seen the faces of this congregation the week after the events of 9/11. We were afraid.

There are many reasons to be afraid in our world.

We can be afraid of getting ill. We can be afraid of losing the one we love the most. We can be afraid of being rejected. We can be afraid that a terrorist might attack our country again.

When it comes to fear the possibilities are endless. So why would we want to follow a Savior who often makes his disciples afraid?

AFRAID OF THE RIGHT THING

I would suggest that we should not try to eliminate fear from our lives. We should just be afraid of the right thing.

The Bible teaches us that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” In other words, not all fear is bad. In some cases fear is not only justified it can be down right life changing. I think that’s what our lesson for today is all about.

Many people say that they want a clearer picture of God. They want to experience the reality and the presence of the one true God. Well, I would say,

“Be careful what you wish for!”

Religious pollsters tell us that people are indeed on a search for spirituality. They want a mystical experience. They want something that helps them transcend the mundane world and gain insight into the eternal.

Unfortunately, what the world wants (and what we often want) does not match the reality of biblical faith. The glory of God revealed by Jesus on the mountain does not engender warm fuzzy feelings. It does quite the opposite.

GLORY DAYS

Peter, James and John wanted what many people want today. They wanted to see glory. They wanted to touch the face of God. And so when the face of Jesus began to shine like the sun, they thought they had arrived at the glory of days gone by.

They remembered how Moses climbed the mountain long ago. They remembered how Moses was transfigured by the glory of God. Even the reflected light of God's glory on Moses' face was too much for the people to bear. Moses had to wear a veil to shield them from that blaze of glory.

Maybe they also remembered how the great prophet Elijah was taken into heaven amid the tumult of a fiery chariot that prevented his protégé, Elisha reaching him on the other side of eternity.

And so when Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures of the Hebrew faith appeared, then Peter was sure it was true. The glory of God had come to earth. God was on their side.

PUT UP A MEMORIAL AND STAY

Actually, in one of the gospel accounts the Bible tells us that Peter had no clue what was going on, that he didn't know what to say.

But, you know Peter. He was like a lot of other people with which you are familiar. A lack of knowledge never kept him from talking!

He said, "Lord, if you want we can make a memorial on the mountaintop. In fact let's make three. We'll make one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

We don't know what else Peter was going to say because the Scripture tells us that he was "interrupted" by the voice of God!

OUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

Peter represents how many people view religion in our day. We try to whittle God down to our own size. We try to contain God in cathedrals where we can visit him once a week and then do whatever we want to do the rest of the week.

We have personalized and individualized God to the point that there's little left of God to stand against us. We worship in carpeted rooms with smiling upbeat worship leaders and preachers who josh with us and keep us happy. Everyone is so delighted to be there, so well adjusted to Jesus.

But, maybe what we really need is what the lesson for today offers. Perhaps we need a God who is mysterious and threatening. Maybe we need a God who is above us and beyond us.

Maybe we need a God who cares nothing for our mountaintop memorials. Maybe we need a God who interrupts our selfish speeches with a surprising word of salvation and sacrifice.

Maybe we need a God who loves us too much to leave us alone. Maybe we need a God who speaks to us in a way that forces us to listen.

LISTEN

A cloud enveloped the mountain. But, this wasn't just any cloud. It was the presence of God.

(You might remember that in the Hebrew Bible the cloud was what led the people of God through the wilderness, and the cloud on Mt. Sinai symbolized the presence of God.)

Anyway, at this point a voice from the cloud says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

The disciples are overcome with fear. They fall to the ground, and only arise when Jesus touches them, and tells them to get up.

Jesus told them, "Don't be afraid."

But, they were still afraid.

What was it that frightened them the most? Was it the bright cloud and the transfiguration of Jesus that made them afraid? Was it the appearance of Moses and Elijah?

None of those things really struck fear in their hearts. They were quite happy to bask in the glory of the past.

It was the call of God's future that put them flat on their faces with fear. It was that voice from heaven that said, "Listen and obey what my Son, Jesus says."

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Lots of people talk about Jesus. Lots of people like Peter want to build memorials on the mountaintop in Jesus' name.

But, I've found that very few people want to listen to Jesus ... and no wonder. The message of Jesus can be absolutely frightening.

A MOUNTAIN BETWEEN TWO VALLEYS

Lots of people talk about the mountaintop experience, but it's important to put the mountain in the context of what Jesus said to his disciples in those days before they ascended that mountain of glory.

He talked about the cross. He told his disciples in very plain, straightforward language, "I will suffer and be killed."

And Peter, the same Peter who is speaking about a memorial on the mountaintop objects to this idea. In fact the Scripture tells us that he dresses down Jesus like a principal talking to a slacker student. He says,

"You've got to get rid of that negative thinking Jesus. Haven't you ever heard of the power of positive thinking?"

But, Jesus does something very scary.

He calls Peter Satan, and he tells the disciples, "If you want to follow me, then you have to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me."

No wonder the disciples fell on the ground when they heard the voice. It wasn't the glory that scared them. It was the message.

Listening to and heeding the words of Jesus is a very frightening prospect. Jesus told the disciples to get up and not be afraid. But, on the way down the mountain he talked once more about what he must suffer and the kind of death he would die.

The transfiguration was (as one commentator put it) a mountaintop between two valleys, a moment of glory sandwiched between two predications of passion. The transfiguration was a high point on the road to Jerusalem, a road that would eventually lead to the cross.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

The fear that Jesus' followers experienced was not just any old fear. It was not fear brought on by some mystical otherworldly experience.

No, the fear they experienced is the fear we experience when we come face to face with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

If you really get to know Jesus, if you really listen to what he says, you will be afraid. There is a cost to following Jesus, and the price is very high.

The Bible tells us that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

False gods, on the other hand, produce no fear. After all false gods, idols are nothing more than the projection of our selfish deceitful desires. There's nothing to fear in that.

But, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is the living God who strikes a holy fear into our hearts. The one true God who comes to us in Jesus commands us to follow him all the way to the cross.

That should make you feel afraid. This will be a journey that will cost him everything, and this is a journey that will cost us everything.

Sometimes people wonder why more people don't come to church.

Maybe they don't come (we say) because we sing all these old, outdated hymns. Maybe they don't come because we don't live up to the message. They don't know that we are Christians by our love. We are hypocrites (they say).

Maybe.

But, sometimes I'm surprised that anyone comes to church.

It's hard to listen to Jesus.

After all what's the point of following a man who's on the way to the cross and asks us to follow him?

From the world's perspective that's crazy. As Paul put it in our lesson from first Corinthians several weeks ago, the cross is "foolishness" from the world's perspective.

But, we learn today that the cross is the wisdom of God. There is glory on the mountaintop this day. But, in just a few days there will be even greater glory on a mount called Calvary.

On that mount the world will change forever.

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Our job is to listen and heed the call of the one who takes up that cross. It will not be easy. It never is.

The price of glory is still found in body broken and blood shed.

Amen.