

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

PARTLY CLOUDY

A sermon preached February 3, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Exodus 24:12 - 25:1 [NRSV] 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 [NRSV] 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."

OK, here's something you can do while you are waiting for the interminable pre-game commentary and the unendurably noisome commercials to conclude before kick-off. Go to your computer and look up *Mancrush.com*. It's one of those internet sites that will assure you that some people have far too much time on their hands. At *Mancrush.com* you'll find rankings of the top 250 male hunks of all time as voted by (as of the writing of this harangue) well over two million mouse clickers across the globe. And speaking of football, Tom Brady, quarterback for the New England Patriots, currently ranks #3 on the *Mancrush* list, just ahead of Teddy Roosevelt, Ernest Hemingway, William

Shakespeare, and George Washington. In #1 spot is Elvis. And, just when you thought this whole thing can't be serious, let's note that in second place in this list of all time hunks is Jesus...and now you can be certain that the whole thing is seriously wrong.

Let's imagine the rewrite: Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James, and John, and while there Jesus is transfigured before them and they see him talking with...wait! Tom? Elvis? Is that you?!

Mancrush.com is a spoof and satire on the base insensibilities of our modern culture. We confuse celebrity with honor and popularity with importance, and our hearts are conflicted by loyalties in response to our most selfish of needs, many of these so deeply buried in our psyches that to honor them with our energies seems to us like worshiping the divine.

And, of course, that is the problem. How do we encounter, know, and worship the one true God and avoid confusing ourselves and confounding the world with an unabashed devotion to the temporary and the passing, the glittering and the glamorous, and all the false divinities of our covetous imaginations?

The story of Moses leading the escaped Hebrew slaves through the wilderness is an elongated tale of a people seeking identity, purpose, order, and destiny. It is a story of struggle, not only with the elements of the wilderness which represent constant threats of survival, but of the people struggling with themselves and their own ready ability to self-destruct. For us, the story of the ancient Hebrews wandering in the wilderness becomes a metaphor of the heart's striving toward God where we search and test, reach and (we pray) grasp what is at the very heart of things and what is our purpose, our calling, and our goal.

When they reach Mt. Sinai, the holy mountain of God, it is Moses alone who reaches the top and converses with God. From this peak Moses descends again to the people, delivering the Law which will give order, reaffirming the Covenant which gives identity, and representing in himself the role of priest through whom God and the people can converse. Each of these themes becomes centered in Jesus in the story of his transfiguration before Peter, James, and John on another mountain in another time.

As with the disciples on that hill, we also struggle with the question, how do we know God? How do we recognize God's workings? How do we experience God's presence? The writers of scripture struggled with this problem in a very practical way: how can mere words, how can human language set a scene in such a way that the reader understands that the presence of the divine is being described? In the Old Testament the writers pull out all the stops in relying on the fury of nature to signify God's presence. Earthquake, fire, wind, lightning and thunder, flood – when the Psalms exhort us to “fear” God, they really mean it and stress the point by limning God's face with the sudden ferocity and power of storm, quake, and wildfire. All this is deeply embedded in metaphors that signify mystery – clouds, mist, darkness.

How does our modern sensibility find words to denote the presence of God? If we were to write scripture, what idiom would we use to evoke God's presence to a reader? We're too sophisticated and scientifically knowledgeable

to naively rely on natural phenomena to do the job. Today, a thunderstorm is a meteorological phenomenon having to do with static electrical charges, an earthquake the shifting of tectonic plates. We must explore other directions to find metaphors of God's presence, but when we do, we mostly rely on our own private experience, and so we end up employing soft words, comforting adjectives, non-threatening images of God or words of bliss, excitement, and thrill, because these are our preferred modes of encounter with the divine.

What a departure such language and such spirituality is from the book from which we have sprung. Antique modes of description evoke the awesome and incipiently destructive force that one faces when in the presence of God. In the New Testament we get virtually none of the earthquake, thunder, and fire of the Old when God's presence is evoked, but neither do we get the mushy coziness of our modern sensibility, and nowhere – Old or New – do we get a picture of God as best friend, chum, or #2 hunk.

Our imaginations need to have God, in Christ, transfigured for us. A careful reading of the transfiguration story in Matthew can suggest that it is not Jesus who changes before the disciples, but the disciples whose perception of Jesus that is changed. After all, the Transfiguration story follows Jesus asking Peter who people say he is. Elijah, John the Baptist, or Moses, Peter says. "And who do you say that I am," Jesus pointedly asks Peter. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Peter says. It is then that Jesus tells his disciples what his destiny will be: that he will go to Jerusalem and there be killed. As an encounter with God, this portion of Matthew pointedly thrusts us who are followers of Christ into not just a passing encounter with Jesus but a commitment involving taking up a cross and following him to the extreme limits of our lives.

So much of contemporary faith seems to be little more than a crush on God. We hear folks speaking romantically about their walk with Jesus, as though strolling the beach, a glorious sunset bathing the couple in afterglow, the swelling sound of lush violins serenading their companionable friendship. I don't mean to play fast and loose with anyone's spiritual sensibilities, but where do we get off making God our buddy? Where are we authorized in any image of scripture to imagine God in this way? If we learn anything from scripture's metaphors, the one who calls us into a majestic service, the one who gifts us with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, the one who demands justice of us and our times is not one of the boys in the stands, not a co-worker consulting us with a great new idea, not a friendly neighbor, nor a pandering peddler of feel-good nostrums. God is God, the mighty Lord, the awesome and powerful Other, the Creator of heaven and earth, Author of our lives, and the One who demands – yes, demands! – utmost respect for God's mysterious presence.

Yes, God is comforter, but God is also challenger. God builds and destroys. God shelters and exposes. God brings us home but also drives us into exile. God speaks and commands but also remains silent and withholds counsel. God gives power, prestige, and might to those who are favored, but God also strips away privileges and reduces to abject deprivation those who are favored. Scripture gives examples of all these alternatives in the lives of God's people. Faith is the context in which we accept, and trust, despite the mysterious

and sometimes unpleasant ways of God in our lives. A faith with a cross at its center cannot be otherwise.

Read the Bible and see how non-emotional it is. See how unromantic and non-cozy it is. See how real it is, how gritty, how “awe-full,” and then test the spirit of this age and wonder whether God’s presence seems authentically represented in the ways people speak and write, and consider how differently God’s presence in our day should be witnessed and declared.

Matthew describes a scene on a mountain in which the disciples gained a new perspective on the risks of following Jesus. At the same time, it is a portion of scripture where God’s purposes through Christ still remain clouded and mysterious. The mist, though bright and shining, still hid the ways of God, confused the disciples, and left them in the dark about how in the world the messiah of God could suffer death. If God is almighty, how could God’s son be anything less than invulnerable?

But that is the nature of God. God self-reveals through the prophets, through scripture, and through Christ. Yet, such revelation is always partial. We “see as through a glass, darkly...,” Paul writes. Our sight can never fully penetrate the mist. God remains a mystery which we may plumb but must never pretend to uncloak with a feigned familiarity.

Let us enter the cloud of God’s mystery and escape the cage of ourselves. Let us release our covetous grasp on needs and issues and wants so intensely personal that God becomes merely an extension of our desires. Let us grab hold of the cross of love and justice and carry the burden of Christ’s ministry into the world. The task of faithful living is to enjoy the mystery of God’s presence and become a ministry of presence in and for the world God created and Christ loved.