

“Jesus On the Mountainside”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, February 23, 2020

Exodus 24, Psalm 99, Matthew 17

“Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain ... Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.” (Ex 24:15, 18)

One foot after another, Moses slowly ascended the mountain. The higher he got, the more the mist settled in around him, until he could no longer see where he was going, and he could not see where he had come from. But he kept on. One foot in front of the other, trusting in the leading of the Spirit within his heart, leading him to the place of meeting, with God.

You’ve been travelling in a car, or maybe even by foot, somewhere where the mist or the fog begins to settle in around you. Where once you clearly discerned the sides of the roads, the telephone poles, the driveways, the houses, the lake, but now, as the fog settles in around you, those signposts are absent – hidden behind a wall of thick mist that blurs your recognition of familiar things. And although you know the road folds out ahead of you, you slow your speed, and you trust that as you move along, that every few feet the road opens up a little more, until finally you reach your destination.

When Moses entered the cloud on the mountain to be with God, they were shrouded in mystery. Mystery is something we are all too keen to shed a bright light on – to unwrap the mystery, to make it plain as day. Think of the 19th century quest to discover the mystery of the pyramids – how were they constructed and put together? And why? Or the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hadron collider built deep beneath the France and Switzerland border, its purpose to discover the God particle that began the universe. And always behind the push is this human desire to discover the reason behind the mystery.

Mystery shrouded the mountain. And the people below in the valley, looked up to the mountain and could see the mystery in the clouds that hung over the mountain. In time, as the bible reveals, the people would grow tired of the wonder of the mystery and seek ways that brought meaning to them – they would melt their gold and make a golden calf to worship instead of this distant God that was shrouded in clouds for weeks up in a mountain. The people had lost patience. They wanted a God that fitted their needs now, not some absent God ensconced in a cloud. The people changed allegiance and followed a god made of gold that they could see and worship on their terms. They sought to contain God in a way that suited their life style, their routines. And they plunked the golden calf in their midst and said, this is good. This works for us.

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them ... and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah,

talking with him. 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.” (Matthew 17:1-4)

I imagine Jesus and his friends sitting under a tree for shade. After sharing a lunch of bread and meat, together with a small jug of wine, Jesus stands up, brushes the crumbs of the meal off his clothing, and says to Peter, James and John, let’s go for a walk – and points up the mountain. The friends laugh at his idea – what, way up there? And Jesus nods and turns to walk up the hill. His friends look at each other and then likewise scamper up the path behind him. Foot after foot, the four of them walk upwards. It is a long trek, taking hours. And then Jesus stops. The friends feel they are in the middle of nowhere, in this wilderness of the mountain side. Clouds seem near enough to touch, the valley down below. And just as they are stretching their tired legs and catching their breath, there is a woosh in the air. They turn to see Jesus now hovering in the air above them, and he is glowing white and then suddenly to his left and to his right are two men, also in the air – Moses and Elijah.

Mystery is a hard thing to grasp – perhaps it’s not meant to be grasped. For the minute Peter tried to grasp it, it disappeared. The minute the words of containment came from his mouth – I will build you three houses in which you can live – the mystery evaporated – into thin air. But while they couldn’t see the mystery now, they could remember the words they heard: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.” They could still ‘hear’ the mystery – which was just as bewildering as seeing it. And Peter found himself on the ground, lying in shock and fear. He then felt the hand of Jesus on his shoulder. And the touch of that hand, with its energy and love, washed away the vestiges of floating prophets in the air and radiant clothing. And he looked around him and everything was as it had been before the vision. There were the trees of the mountain and the valley below. Mystery didn’t hang around for long.

Both scripture texts contain a good dollop of mystery – something our culture has a hard time seeing, remembering, encountering. Ours is a culture where mysteries are to be explored, defined and documented – not left to simply be a mystery. The thing about these two texts is the way in which mystery is quickly suspended by human activity. In the Exodus text, the people will grow impatient with the mystery that takes up space in their lives without explanation. And the people will turn their back on mystery and build a golden calf that makes far more sense to them because its tangible, they can touch it, see it, worship it. And again, with Jesus on the mountain – Peter’s instinctive response to the mystery is to contain it – to put it in a house, a dwelling with four walls and a roof.

When I think of these scripture texts, and the human responses to mystery, I am reminded again and again of the ways in which humanity has a documented desire to contain mystery, to pin it down with explanations. The church has always been a place where the mystery of faith is celebrated and wrestled with. We say in our communion service, let us proclaim the mystery of our faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Over centuries upon centuries, the church has slowly grown in size and greatness, spreading across continents and peoples and cultures. One marker of the church’s presence is its buildings. Sarah Travis comments: “Soaring cathedrals and large stone churches on main corners of towns and cities – these testify not only to the prominence and power of God, but also to the

prominence and power of the church.”<sup>1</sup> In our quest to build houses for God, have we become obsessed with structure and forgotten that to find God, we need to ‘listen to him’ as the voice told Peter, James, and John?

As we continue to venture into a society that views church with less and less interest, I wonder where God is in all of this? And I recognize my own struggles when I read the text today from Matthew – that in our haste to grab some of that mystery that truly is at the root of our faith and hold it, to contain it in our buildings and our institutionalized church structures, that we can suffocate the mystery out of our faith. We become closed and inward looking. We lose sight of where Jesus went. The minute Peter said ‘We’ll build you a house’, the mystery departed. And in its wake, it left Peter with the words, ‘Listen to him.’ It’s as if God is saying, I will have none of your desire to build me a house in which to hold me in some way – if you want to find me, listen to him.

Like the mist and the fog that Moses encountered as he followed that leading of his heart, step by step up that mountain, into a landscape where there were no recognizable markers, the church in future decades will find itself in the wilderness, without the markers it has come to know and rely on – like Sunday worship, church groups, buildings with steeples, church based ministry, all these activities that inform our identity as Christians.

As a commentary asks, “When facing a wilderness without markers that is fraught with potential danger, are we tempted to let fear overwhelm our faith?”<sup>2</sup> In a post-Christendom world, which many speculate we are entering, it will feel like we’re walking into a dense fog, not able to see any of the markers that usually orient our direction. But Moses walked up that mountain, step by step, into the mist and fog of the mountain, not knowing the way, but trusting in God’s leading. Peter tried to contain the mystery in a dwelling that he was going to build, and God said in essence, you won’t find me in a building, but you will find me if you listen to him.

As a church, we will share this feeling of disorientation as we move into the future of the church. But we will also feel the affirmation of Jesus’ touch on our shoulders, as we follow him, step by step, into this time of mystery.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Travis: Metamorphosis, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word, Homiletical Perspective, 439.