



Surprises on Mountains
Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9
February 23, 2020
Pastor Diane

Our two scripture passages today take place on mountains. We know a lot about mountains here in Green Valley. We have our own beautiful range – the Santa Rita Mountains.

I think what I love the most about our mountains is that they are constantly changing. They look one way in full sun, turn red as the sun goes down. Clouds form patterns and shadows on a sunny day. When it rains and we can't see them, or when the sun sets and the rain turns to pink and purple. And when it is cold on the mountain, as it was yesterday, the clouds descend over them creating mystery and beauty. Our mountains take our breath away. Many of you have said to me, "The mountains speak to me."

Let's take a look at our scripture passages, which talk about mountains.

Our first passage is Exodus 24, starting with verse 12:

¹² The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

¹³ Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. ¹⁴ He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them."

¹⁵ When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, ¹⁶ and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. ¹⁷ To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. ¹⁸ Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

A carpenter and his apprentice were walking together through a large forest. And when they came across a tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful oak tree, the carpenter asked his apprentice: "Do you know why this tree is so tall, so huge, so gnarled, so old and beautiful?"

The apprentice looked at his master and said: "No . . . why?"

"Well," the carpenter said, "because it is useless. If it had been useful it would have been cut long ago and made into tables and chairs, but because it is useless it could grow so tall and so beautiful that you can sit in its shade and relax."

God calls Moses to come up the mountain. Moses does so, and ends up sitting in a fog for 6 days. Doing nothing. Useless. Waiting. God is silent. Moses can't even enjoy the view.

I think of those of you who have been sick, hospitalized, injured, recovering from knee and hip replacements. Sent home to do nothing. Feeling useless. Waiting until you heal. Living in a fog.

The question is: why did God make Moses wait 6 days in a fog? Maybe Moses was exhausted. He just had a long and grueling encounter with Pharaoh, and was able to rescue the people from slavery in Egypt while being pursued by the Egyptian Army. Working for God can be exhausting, and perhaps Moses just needed to sleep for 6 days, being prepared for what was coming next.

Or, maybe God was making Moses wait 6 days in a fog to teach Moses how to listen. Or, be patient. Or, how to wait.

On the 7th day, after 6 days of nothing, God calls to Moses, invites him further into the fog and begins to speak. God and Moses stayed together on that mountain for a total for 40 days.

Out of that encounter Moses receives the 10 Commandments, 10 Words that tell us how to relate to God and with each other, 10 words we still listen to today. All because Moses waited in silence for 6 days and did nothing.

Now, lets turn to our second scripture passage: Matthew 17, often called the Transfiguration of Our Lord. And see if it sounds a bit familiar.

Read Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

This, too, is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Did you notice some similarities to our first passage? There is that reference to 6 days. What happened 6 days earlier is that Jesus began to talk about his death on a cross and something about being raised to life after 3 days. The disciples had 6 days to think about it.

Another similarity: Jesus and his disciples go up a mountain. A lot of things happen on mountains in the Bible. For the last 3 weeks, Pastor Craig talked about The Sermon on the Mount where Jesus did some amazing teaching.

Another similarity: Moses is in both of them, along with Elijah in the NT passage. And the three begin to have a conversation. We are not privy to that conversation. I like to think they were encouraging Jesus as he began his walk to the cross.

Another similarity: a cloud descends upon the mountain enveloping them, and God begins to speak. The disciples are seeing Jesus as he really is, and just as they are somewhat adjusting to this vision, Moses and Elijah appear. (I don't know. How did they know it was Moses and Elijah? Did Jesus introduce them? They didn't have any pictures of them, did they?)...the disciples see the three talking, and Peter can't help himself. He begins to babble: Wow, this is amazing. Let's stay here forever. Let's make some shelters so we can do that.

Peter must have gone on and on, because God arrives in a cloud and interrupts Peter. "Stop talking Peter! Listen to my beloved Son." You don't have to do anything. Just listen. Do nothing. I wonder how many times God tries to interrupt me when I pray. Stop talking, Diane! Just listen.

I love this last little section. The disciples fall to the ground in terror. Suddenly, they each feel a touch. Jesus is touching them. Don't be afraid. Rise up.

I am sure Moses was transformed by his encounter with God. I am sure Peter and James and John were transformed with their encounter of the transfigured Jesus and his touch. These encounters of doing nothing and listening prepared them for the work ahead.

In fact, Peter talks about this encounter in his letter in the Bible we now call 2 Peter. He writes, "For Jesus received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." (2 Peter 1:17-18)

It was this memory that kept Peter going in sharing the Good News of the Risen Savior even though it meant being put to death for doing so.

These men were changed because they sat in a fog and did nothing. Come to me, God said to Moses. Draw deeper into the cloud. Listen to me, God said to the disciples. Do nothing.

Back in 2016, I had the privilege of taking a 3-month sabbatical. It is a gift given to pastors who remain in one place for 7 years. On the 7th year, a pastor can take a paid 3-month leave of absence. Most pastors that I talked to used the opportunity for several things: one, to spend time with family, and two, take a study time away from home, especially overseas. One went to Spain. Another traveled throughout Europe. Another studied in England.

I did none of those things. I did the ultimate introverted sabbatical – I stayed home alone for 3 months (with a few short trips to see friends and family). To an extrovert, this sounds excruciatingly painful. But to an introvert like me, it is the ultimate. (Now don't get me wrong...to be an introvert means you still love people; you just need time away from them to recover.)

Here is what I wrote in a journal on Day 2 of my Sabbatical: “The hardest part of this whole sabbatical thing is waking up with thoughts of all I want to accomplish during my sabbatical and giving myself permission to say “not yet.” I want to do everything at once. I guess part of the sabbatical is learning to slow down. “

Day 3

I've noticed I am paying more attention to detail, particularly outside. I haven't really looked at the mountains much this year...just too many things on my mind. Now that my mind is clear of stuff, I sit and notice the details of the mountains, especially today as the shadows of the clouds created wonderful texture.

I am paying more attention to the birds, too. A couple of finches were doing a mating dance, which I have never seen before. I never realized that the dove cooed while pursuing the female. The cardinal is enjoying food from my cardinal feeder. And while it rained, a baby hummingbird sat on my tube feeder trying to figure out how it worked. It was really cute.

Day 6

Today was a hard day. I knew this was going to happen. The setting in of being alone....I was so restless that I couldn't get myself to do anything. I kind of wandered. Eventually by mid-afternoon, I settled into the day. I have to figure out how to deal with this...How do I deal with these next months?

By day 7, I had finally settled into a pattern. The mornings were for God. I prayed, read scripture, journaled, read a spiritual book. Sometimes it lasted for an hour; other times it lasted through early afternoon. The afternoons were for home projects. I got a lot of walls painted.

Here is what I began to learn as I spent this time with God:

Day 22

During this sabbatical, I feel like I am in the desert (ha...I really am! Literally!) with the aloneness and the weepiness. Yet, it has become so rich...and extravagant. To have this time each day to spend as long as I want in prayer, scripture, reading spiritual books, journaling. I will miss it.

Day 35

Today...I realized what a Sabbatical does. It empties your life of something (a job) so God can fill the emptiness with something else.

That first week of Sabbatical was tough because I didn't know what to do with the emptiness. But as I filled the emptiness with scripture, prayer, reading a spiritual book, journaling, God has met me with His presence (which is the gift of emptiness). I am filled with joy and gratefulness for having this time.

Day 41

And thank you for this sabbatical which has been such a gift, a joy, a challenge. I pray by spending all this time with You that I will be a better person and pastor when I return to church.

When I did return, 10 days later, Pastor Larry DeLong took his own life. For the next 8 months, Pastor Paul Philips (an associate pastor at the time) and I led all of you through grief. And what was amazing is that everything I needed to lead you was contained in that journal I wrote during those 3 months of silence and listening to God. Every sermon, devotion, Valley Voice article was in that journal. God used our time together to prepare me for the time after Larry's death.

On that mountain, during those 40 days that God and Moses had together, God prepared Moses for 40 years of wandering in the wilderness with the Israelite people. On that mountain, God prepared Jesus and the disciples for the death and resurrection of Christ. Listen to him.

God calls to us. Draw near to me (a gracious invitation!). Listen to Jesus. Do not be afraid to enter the fog. And, wait.

Now, I don't expect you to what I did by spending 3 months alone with God. I do expect you to do this: Lent starts this Wednesday and goes for 40 days. Take this Lenten season to get closer to God. Many people like to give something up for Lent. Instead, I want you to shift your focus to what you can do, or add onto your life to draw closer to God, to listen, to wait.

I encourage you to receive your ashes at one of the two services this Wednesday. Attend Taize worship Wednesday evenings during Lent, a service of listening and silence. Pick up a Lenten devotional at the Welcome Centers and do the daily readings for Lent, spending time with God in the mornings or evenings. I hope you will sign up for one of the Lenten classes called the Way to study together with your brothers and sisters in Christ, and learn the way of Jesus.

This Lent may you encounter some of that wonder, some of that surprise, some of that mysterious voice who still calls from whatever cloud there may be, and urges you to listen and follow. As a result, may it prepare us (you, me, the church) for whatever God calls us to next. Alleluia. Amen.

The Apostle's Creed, page 35.

