

Sermon: Ain't No Mountain

Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley

Scriptures: Matthew 17:1-9 and Exodus 24:12-18

Last weekend, the kids and I went with my aunt and uncle to the aquarium in Baltimore. We enjoy going there and seeing the animals and all the rescue efforts and planet friendly things they do. I appreciate how they try to encourage that same spirit to live on in others as we go back to life outside the aquarium. As we left the dolphin area, we passed a window behind which there was no water. No animals. Nothing seemingly sea related whatsoever. Behind this window was a series of tubes of various sizes and colors with valves, wheels, and levers. This window was a peek into the water management system of the National Aquarium. As we looked through the window, my uncle said something about how amazing and complex it must be to try to manage all the water in the aquarium. "Look," he remarked, "at all those tubes with water going all over these buildings," which sit on the shore of a harbor in the Patapsco River leading out into the Chesapeake Bay and going on into the Atlantic Ocean. How *wild* is that?

I think what struck me in that moment, though, was the contrast between the control that had been exerted over the water in that water management system and how little control we truly have over the rest of the water that makes such an impact on us out in the world. It's hard to avoid talk about water. If it's not too much rain, it's lack of it. If it's not flooding, it's melting glaciers. If it's not pollution, it's rising sea levels. We hear the frequent refrain "water is life" because, in essence, it is. Water is life because it impacts every single aspect of ours. As I looked down at the tubes, I thought, this really is the epitome of "the illusion of control."

We human beings love to convince—or perhaps fool—ourselves into thinking we are in control. We spend a good portion of our time at year's end trying to figure out new visions of control as we form resolutions meant to exercise dominion over our bodies and our lives. The illusion of control is just that, though, isn't it? An illusion. Sure, we can control some things, but only to a point. We can control our bodies, until a disease or

injury rocks our world and we realize we need more help than we can muster on our own. We can control water, until a sweeping storm blows through knocking out power for days or an earthquake rumbles from beneath creating a tsunami we cannot outrun. In moments when control has left us, we look to God. And those aren't the times we want God's still, small voice, are they? No, in those moments, we want big, bright, powerful God to swoop in and alleviate our burdens.

We have arrived at the final Sunday in the season of light which we call epiphany. Throughout this epiphany season, we've seen the light of Christ shown forth (that's what epiphany means: "showing forth") revealing his significance in various ways to many different types of people in his life and ministry. Today, we arrive at the seminal mountaintop experience. This is where God is going to make it obvious who Jesus really is. Jesus will be transfigured. It's as if God is saying, "Listen, I've given you a star, my voice booming from the clouds, miraculous healings, extraordinary calls to service, and a whole new worldview to point out to you who my son is, but... if you still *don't* "get" it... I'm going to show you in spectacular fashion with indisputable proof up here atop a mountain and *then* I'm going to place you in the presence of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew scriptures!" It's like that Verizon commercial. Do you hear me now?

In the verses that precede the transfiguration, Jesus has delivered a bit of a blow to the disciples. He's taught them what is perhaps his most painful, difficult teaching: he must suffer, die, and be resurrected. And for anyone who wishes to follow him? Life isn't going to be a piece of cake. His disciples must "deny themselves and take up their cross" to follow him. It is here that the disciples and Matthew's audience sense the shift from happy miracles toward the horror to occur on calvary. Before they begin that move, though, Matthew has an important message, one which will be delivered in a place it cannot possibly be hidden: up on a mountain.

Six days after Jesus imparts his difficult teaching, he draws away from the crowds. He often does this alone, but not on this occasion. No, this time, Jesus asks Peter, James,

and his brother, John, to accompany him. No one else, just them. Why them? Well, who knows. I wonder why *they* thought Jesus had selected them? They were among the first four to be called, but he doesn't include Andrew, Peter's brother. Whatever the reason they think they've been asked, it's clear to the reader that Jesus needs witnesses to what's about to happen.

And what is that? This is the moment when it's made incontrovertibly clear that Jesus is, as Paul puts it in Colossians, "the visible likeness of the invisible God." When they arrive atop the mountain, Jesus is transformed, changed before their very eyes. But he doesn't become a different person or an animal or a butterfly or something, Jesus is, instead, shining as bright as the sun. Even his clothes become a "dazzling white." Then "suddenly" (I mean, as if that transfiguration wasn't sudden enough!), suddenly he's talking to Moses and Elijah, two Jewish figures that would have been *very* familiar to Peter, James, and John. What do they talk about? Well, we don't know and apparently neither does Peter. In fact, he's going interrupt their conversation and this astounding, confusing moment with an offer. Peter, mind blown from the sheer inexplicability of this event, tries in that moment to, in a sense, take back some form of control. Here are these unexplainable things happening before Peter's eyes, and he's going to offer to build some shelters for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus.

That's when God breaks in, as if eager to make sure these humans know who is really in control, God's voice comes booming from the bright cloud that overshadowed them, saying (as God did at Jesus's baptism), "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased..." and then he adds, "Listen to him!" It is then that God's earth-shaking, life-changing voice became too much for the disciples and they fell to the ground in fear. Peter, James, and John realized they are not in control of this situation and put away that illusion, allowing the magnitude of the moment to fully sink in. They're understandably terrified.

I've said before that I love the transfiguration story. What I love about it is not the way in which Jesus is transfigured and made known unquestionably as God's own beloved

son. It's not the appearance of the titans of the Hebrew Bible: Moses and Elijah. It's not even Peter's relatable cluelessness, which always kind of amuses me because it makes me think of how all of us are clueless so much of the time. It is none of those things. What I love about this passage has nothing to do with what humans present or the big, bright, powerful vision of God that appears in in that moment. What I love about this passage is what Jesus does next.

Jesus was having an important conversation atop this mountain. It is a pivotal moment in his life—one that is reported in each of the synoptic gospels (but not John, because John has to be different, of course). It's memorable. It's significant. It's a big deal. Jesus could have lingered in that moment. Basked, quite literally, in the glow. But what does Jesus do when his people are afraid? The text tells us, "Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." Jesus, God incarnate, in one of the biggest moments of his human existence sees people in need and goes right to them and gives them relief. It's as if he's saying, "Hey! It's okay guys, I'm here. Don't worry."

And Jesus doesn't just do that, but also does something more. Amid all that has happened, when they look up, it's just Jesus standing before them. No Moses, no Elijah, no bright overshadowing cloud or loud booming Divine voice. Just their friend offering comfort. That's my favorite part of this passage. Jesus's holy humanity in this moment to, again, see people in need and to go right down to them.

So often we want that big, bright, powerful God to intervene amidst life's most trying moments. We think what we need is Divine power—that that power will solve all that ails us. But in this moment, it is precisely that power that has brought Peter, John, and James to their knees. Big God is, here, not so much the solution, but rather quite a big problem for tiny humans. In that moment they didn't need big God, they needed God in Jesus. They needed God's providential love to make itself evident to them and comfort them in a way that all God's power could not.

When things are hardest or most uncertain, it's difficult to put forward the faith required to trust in God's providential love, isn't it? When we can't control things, we get frightened and anxious and want quick resolutions to whatever we're going through. It's hard to be present because we want solutions to fix, instead of leaning into what Richard Rohr calls, "the Big river of God's providential love." Rohr says that in those moments when things are so hard, we might be tempted to "push or even create [our] own river" one we can control ourselves, rather than relying on the Big River of God's love. But it is in those moments that we sometimes must, instead, lean into our faith. "Faith," writes Rohr, "does not need to push the river, precisely because it is able to trust that *there is a river*. The river is flowing; we are already in it." In other words, God is already working. God is the Big River that is already *always* flowing.

We can make our own rivers if we want to, but do we really need to? Not necessarily, but we're sure gonna try aren't we. That window at the aquarium looked really impressive with all its tubes and tunnels used to force control on all the water and fish, and animals in those buildings. It was clearly meant to show off the magnificent engineering and control effort, but that control is an illusion. It's tempting to let ourselves think so, but we don't control water. In fact, we might even say that it controls *us*. We can try to understand the innermost workings of our universe, down to the tiniest organisms, so that we can learn how to control and manipulate our existence, but it's deceptive. Ultimately, we aren't the ones in control; the Big River is. God is.

In an overwhelming situation, we must learn, as Peter did, that there are some things we cannot control. Sometimes, faith is the order of the day; in those moments, we must trust in the flow of the Big River of God's providential love. What happened on that mountaintop was scary—but the disciples trusted Jesus well enough to follow him up that mountain. What they forgot in that moment was that the same God who led them up to that mountaintop was always going to be the one who stayed to comfort them. If God brings you to that mountain-top experience, God will see you through it.

A few weeks ago, we talked about where we met God for the first time. Everyone wrote down when they first knew about Jesus. But the truth is, no matter where that original epiphany, showing forth, introduction, or invitation to God happens, the journey doesn't end there. We've got to continue to trust God enough to follow where God leads. And the best things in my life have happened when I have looked for and followed where God was leading—even when that was into an unknown or even scary place. If God takes you up to the mountaintop, you can trust God's providential love will not abandon you there.

Just like the song says, ain't no mountain high enough, my friends, to keep God from you. Where God leads, God stays... not just up to the top of the mountain, but also down into the valley. Peter, James, and John saw in that moment what we all need to remember today: whether we go high atop the mountain, out to sea, or on adventures yet unknown, we never go alone: The Big River of God's love is with us always. Amen.