

## “Meeting God”

### Matthew 17:1-9

**February 19, 2023, Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager**

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” <sup>8</sup> And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

*<sup>9</sup>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.”*

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Some years ago, I got to go on a pilgrimage with a group of high school seniors to Greece, Turkey, and Rome, tracing the footsteps of Paul and the early church. And for almost every student who came, there was one highlight above all else. It wasn't the sights of Rome, or the amazing food we had in Ephesus, or even the beaches of Greece.

It was a cave.

On our third day there, we visited the island of Patmos. Patmos is a Greek Island just off the coast of Turkey, where the Book of Revelation was originally written by a man named John who was exiled there for proclaiming Christ is Lord. Patmos today is a tiny, but beautiful island. There is one craggy peak on the island, and on the very top of it is an ancient monastery, still in use today. As you enter its grounds, you are met with strong incense, icons galore, beautiful mosaics, and lots and lots of cats everywhere.

Right below the monastery is a cave. This cave is claimed to be the spot where John had most of his visions – of Jesus as both lion and lamb, of heavenly worship with glory and awe, of the new earth where God wipes away every tear. The cave is now a small chapel, with a great icon on one wall, a simple altar, a few wooden benches, and just enough candlelight to see. When we visited, we got to join in a brief worship service. And then we were invited to stay for a few extra minutes.

It was those extra minutes that will always be remembered. It was just us. The world outside was very much outside. No cell reception. No Wi-Fi. No worries about what is next or what others are thinking. But here, just a moment to be still and know God is with us. We were invited to do three things. We were invited to be silent. To let the space and the Spirit of God speak to us. We were invited to kneel down and pray, whatever was deeply longing on our heart. And finally, we were invited to light a candle in the center of the room, remembering that Christ is the light of the world, and that we carry that light with us. I remember doing all three, walking outside, and realizing that I was one of the first to leave.

These high schoolers stayed. And stayed and stayed. And when they came out, tears of joy and peace were on their faces. They couldn't put it into words, at least not yet. But even days later they all spoke of that time being a time they would always remember. A holy space.

There was something to that cave. To the quietness of it, the intimacy of it. Even the darkness of it, which paused all our other thoughts and worries. But I believe what truly happened is that here in that cave each of our youth longed to meet God, to know God is with them to know there is something more beautiful and awesome, and even fearful and challenging. And there in that place, everything was right for us to open up to God's spirit and presence and eternal light.

Our reading for today is another moment of people longing to meet God, to hear God's voice, to see God's face, and know God's light. They are Peter, James, and John, disciples of Christ. They have followed Jesus now for years, and seen his miracles, heard his teaching, ate at his table. But if you read the gospels, you learn that over and over again, they miss what God is doing right in front of them. They try to make God something to understand and control, more than experience and be transformed by. Right before this mountaintop moment, Peter rebukes Jesus for

talking about going to the cross, and love looking like sacrifice and solidarity with the poor, the sinners, the outcast, and oppressed. Peter declares him Christ but tries to make Jesus fit his image of Christ.

Peter is a lot like us, always wanting to say something or do something, to have some sense of control or normalcy. But when God comes, we are often called to give up all of that. Here on this mountain. Peter, James, and John are stilled. They are invited not to have to build anything or say anything at all. But to simply meet God's awesome light and love. To listen and see. To be still and know that God is here, in our lives and in our world.

Those youth that day in Patmos showed me how much we still long for that and need it. I know I was tempted to after the cave try to explain it or make sense of it. But they kept challenging me to just receive that moment, receive it as a gift, and know that meeting God is more than enough.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup> And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup> 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."

Our challenging, just like, Peter, and James' and John's, was not to try to make sense of that moment or control it, but to continue it on. To keep meeting God after we came down the mountain, after we exited the cave, after we left the Mediterranean, and came back home, and went to work and school and life and so many distractions that pull us.

Peter wanted to stay up there forever. But Jesus had other plans. He tells them get up and do not be afraid and then leads them back down the mountain, to all the challenges and noise and lives and people that are waiting below.

But Jesus knew something that Peter did not yet know. Jesus knew that God doesn't just meet us in those mountaintop moments. Once we've had them, we start to see God at work in everyday times, that others may pass by, but we know this is holy. This is God/ God is doing a new thing and I get to witness it, know it, and be a part of it.

Peter never went back up that mountain again. But he kept meeting God. He met God in a widow's offering in the temple and a woman's wiping Jesus feet with oil. He met God in the people waving palms and children singing Hosannas. He met God in having his own feet washed, and being invited to share in a table of bread, wine, and unending grace. He met God in a garden at night praying, in an empty tomb two days later. He met God in a Roman Centurion named Cornelius wanting to be a part of God's family. He met God in a blind man sitting at the city gate. And he met God in people from all over, in different languages and backgrounds and histories, together receiving God's message of love and new life, Holy Spirit and community.

On this transfiguration Sunday, our challenge is not to have all the answers or figure them all out. It is to be open to meeting God. To listen and see, to be quiet and learn. To meet God on the mountaintop, but also in the busyness of our world. In everyday moments, of welcome and hospitality, of singing and praise, of holding hands and praying for others, of grabbing coffee and going for walks, of using our gifts and meeting new neighbors, of daring to serve and act and speak for justice and mercy in our world. And in each time, to see God's light. To know God is not done and to realize God continues to want to meet us and be with us and love us, and claim us again and again and again. Amen.