

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: February 19, 2023, Yr. A, Transfiguration Sunday

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Title: Not Like You've Seen Before

Focus: Amidst the wondrous signs of power on the mountain, power that could be used for various purposes, Jesus encourages the three disciples and returns with them down the mountain, resuming his journey to Jerusalem, which will include offering himself in self-giving love through suffering and death on the cross.

First Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The 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." ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To 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." ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The 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. ¹⁷Now 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. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

¹Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then 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." ⁵While 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!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As 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."

The Wonder of a Mountaintop

Mountaintops have always been places that inspire awe and wonder and grandeur.

Of the peaks which immediately surround Lake Tahoe, the highest among them at 9,739 feet is Mt. Tallac on the southwest side of the lake. The name *Tallac* comes from the Washoe word *dalak*, which means "big mountain." It is a commanding landmark, visible from across the lake and prominent not just for its height, but also the

distinctive cross-shaped patch of snow on its face, which typically lasts into early summer months because it's shaded by the peak from the afternoon sun.

This photo was taken July 8 of last year. You can see the remnants of that cross shape on its face. Dale Ressler and I and Jeff, another hiking buddy of mine, hiked to Tallac last summer. As many years as I have lived in the area and taken Tahoe adventures, I had never been to the summit before.



We got an early start; I think we were at the trailhead by 6:30. When we arrived at the summit, there were only 2 other groups there, allowing us to revel in the views and the quiet and the wonder of the place.

Since Tallac is on the southwest side of the lake, this view is looking to the northeast.

- Tahoe is of course the primary lake in the photo.
- Cascade Lake is in the foreground.
- That's Emerald Bay to the top or north side of Cascade.



You can see how the mouth of the bay stretches to Tahoe on the east side.

When Jeff and Dale and I were planning the hike, I was a bit crabby about their quickly-agreed-upon plan to get such an early start. I knew they were right, of course, but I didn't look forward to getting out the door so early when it was still dark.

The reward came when we were just the third cluster of hikers to reach the peak that day. We stood in wonder, looking to Desolation Wilderness to the west and the lake stretching out to the north and east. The blue sky. The rich blue color of the lake. The bird's-eye views of Cascade Lake and Emerald Bay before us. . . our elevated perspective giving us a view that confirmed the shapes that I had only seen before on a map.

As I recall, we were there for about an hour and a half, mostly silent, just taking it all in, trying to implant those views in our brains. We had lunch, rested, and continued to absorb it all. I think we were all ready to go at the same time. The increasing number of hikers as the late morning turned to noontime led groups of hikers getting closer and closer to one another. Their collective chatter was starting to bug me, and I think Dale and Jeff, too. We had relished the silence and the sense of wonder the views fostered.

Of course, it's not just modern-day adventure seekers who are drawn to mountaintops. In the ancient world, from cultures as far-flung as Greece and Japan, mountaintops have inspired awe as well. Even more particularly, they have been places of encounter with God.

Power Evident on Mt. Sinai

That's just what's happening on Mt. Sinai in the reading from Exodus. Like sitting on the top of Mt. Tallac, the place inspires a sense of wonder and awe. The words attempt to describe the majesty of the setting, but you know they fall short.

- There is the mountain itself.
- A cloud covers the peak of the mountain.
- “The glory of the Lord settled on Mt. Sinai” (v. 16).
- “The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain. . .” (v. 17).
 - *Devouring fire* is particularly an image of power. It's actually a bit frightening, isn't it—with *devouring* as in something that consumes or even destroys. That sounds like power that can harm.

These all describe, or attempt to put into words, the majesty or awe or grandeur of the setting. The words reflect the power of the setting.

Power on the Mountain in the Transfiguration

The pattern of power displayed on a mountaintop repeats in the description of the setting in the reading from Matthew. Jesus takes with him to the mountaintop Peter and James and John. There they see . . .

- The appearance of Jesus is dramatically changed—he is “transfigured before them” (v. 2)
- His face shone like the sun (v. 2)
- His clothes became dazzling white (v. 2)
- Moses and Elijah appeared before them, representing the Law and the Prophets and signaling Jesus' connection to or continuity with them (v. 3).
- A bright cloud overshadowed them (v. 4)
- And then the divine voice came from the cloud which connects Jesus as God's own beloved (v. 5). “This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him!”
- The disciples were overcome by awe & fear (v. 6)

Overwhelming Power, but . . .

Both stories describe potentially overwhelming power.

In Exodus, that power or “the appearance of the glory of the Lord” is described as a “devouring fire” (Ex. 24:17). As I said before, “devouring fire” sounds destructive, like a wind-driven wildfire.

In Matthew, the power and the divine voice from the cloud are so great that the disciples “fell to the ground and were overcome by fear” (Mt. 17:6).

And yet, both these stories present the divine power of God as approachable or accessible, rather than that power ultimately causing harm or division or fear.

In Exodus God Establishes a Covenant with them:

- The power in Exodus was described as a “devouring fire on the top of the mountain” and yet Moses approached and entered the cloud and went up on the mountain and remained there (v. 18)
 - The power is so great that it could be described as destructive, and yet Moses willingly enters it, seemingly without fear, and he remained there “40 days and 40 nights,” which in the Bible can simply suggest a *very long time*.

Today’s passage, verses 12-18, opens with Moses and his assistant Joshua approaching the mountain, and then Moses alone went up the mountain. But there’s also a reference to Moses turning to the elders who have been with him so that he can instruct them to stay.

In the preceding passage, verses 1-12, all of these elders, 70 of them, are with Moses. This story describes a covenant meal shared by the leaders of the people of Israel and their God. There are signs in this story, too, of God’s power and glory:

- “[T]hey saw the God of Israel. Under [God’s] feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.”

The story describes how the people saw God, but does not directly describe God’s physical presence, but the brightness of the ground on which God was revealed. And even then, the description is vague, using “something like” and the simile “like the very heaven” to describe it. As we’ve said about sitting on the top of Mt. Tallac or the descriptions from the primary reading from Exodus and Jesus being transfigured in Matthew, God’s glory is beyond the capacity of the human being to describe, much less comprehend.

But the additional wonder is that this overwhelming power, this power with the potential to harm or destroy (like a “devouring fire”) is revealed in the context established by verses 1-12 of a covenant-making ceremonial meal. The power that is being revealed is on the side of the people of Israel, supporting their leaders, and establishing them as a people.

God initiates and establishes this covenant. The first line of today’s passage from Exodus underscores that: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain’” (v. 12). It is God inviting, God taking the initiative.

A few chapters later, as more dimensions of this covenant are revealed, the heart or intent of this covenant is declared as God says,

- “I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them: I am the LORD their God” (29:45)

The key word expressing God's intent or God's promise is the word "dwell." That word *dwell* is our passage today as well, though it's obscured because the NRSV, the translation we read, uses *settled*, instead of *dwell*, which makes the text flow a little smoother.

With this English substitution, Exodus 24:16 text reads, "Then the glory of the Lord *dwelled* on Mount Sinai."

The Good News from this passage is that the raw power of God, which could be terrifying, is exercised by one who has decided to dwell in the midst of a people and to enter into a covenant with them. God invites and welcomes the people into a relationship. The covenant expresses that they belong to each other. God will look out for them and they will be God's people.

In Matthew. . . Jesus touches them and accompanies them down the mountain and toward Jerusalem.

Did you see how this passage from Matthew begins?

- "Six days later. . ."
- "Six days after what?" a careful reader would ask.

"Six days later. . ."

The passage begins with an intentional reference to what happened immediately before this. Jesus asked the disciples how people viewed him, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is (I am)?" (Mt. 16:13)

- Responses: You remind them of leaders like prophets Elijah or John the Baptist or another prophet (Mt. 16:14)
- Then Jesus directs the question to them: "Who do *you* say that I am?" (v. 15)
- Peter responds, "You are the Messiah." The one we've been waiting for. . . (v. 16)
 - And Jesus praises him. And then continues. . .

"From that time on (suggesting over and over again), Jesus began to tell them that he would go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, and be killed, and be raised. . ." (v. 21)

- Peter began to rebuke him (This is no kind of way for a Messiah to be. . .)
- Jesus explained that this was just what he intended—it's a divine plan. (v. 23)

So, the context into which Matthew places this story about the Transfiguration of Jesus and of God's divine power being evident in him is a dispute between Peter and Jesus about what it means to be the Messiah. Peter cannot imagine that being Messiah should include suffering and death. He cannot imagine that divine power would be expressed in that way--that defies all expectation—it's inconceivable. And yet Jesus tells him over and over again that this is true.

Despite this evidence of Power, Jesus restrained or channeled or directed this power for the sake self-giving love

In that conversation with Peter, Jesus redefined power or how he would use power as Messiah. That redefinition leads us into today's passage. After all these signs of overwhelming power:

- The changed appearance,
- the face shining like the sun,
- the dazzling white clothes,
- Moses and Elijah standing alongside him,
- and the voice of God declaring him the Beloved, the disciples *are* overwhelmed.

They fall to the ground and they are overcome with fear (v. 6).

But Jesus

- touches them
- saying "Get up" (Be raised, be resurrected)
- "Do not be afraid."
- He came down the mountain with them

And he continued his journey to Jerusalem and the cross (v. 9), thus continuing on the path or journey to Jerusalem, which, as he described for Peter, also means his suffering and death.

Jesus describes himself as willing to undergo suffering on our behalf. He is not a messiah who has come to conquer with political or military power, but who has power and who defies expectations in his use of that power by his willingness to suffer and die for our sake.

Returning from the Mountain

Final photo with Scott, Dale and Jeff descending.

Sitting on the top of Mt. Tallac for an hour and a half was not too long for me. I can tell you I was not bored or restless. Had the chatter of the other hikers not begun to disturb the sense of wonder I had, I don't think I would have been nudged to go back down. Long-term, I don't think I would ever tire of the view. Until I am physically limited by injury or age, I can see myself taking that trail again and again.



The good news we have read today from Exodus and Matthew is that the signs of power we see with Moses on Mt. Sinai and in the transfigured Jesus in Matthew are of the divine one who reaches out to establish covenant with God's people and who is willing not just to accompany us on the mountaintop, but who willingly walks to Jerusalem and to his own suffering and death for our sake.

Thanks be to God for a love like that.