

Scripture:
Matthew 14:23-33

Wave Walking

Have you ever noticed that in scripture when people meet with God it is usually on the mountaintop. “In the English language we have the expression “mountain-top experience”. This expression has originated from the Bible because of the dealings God had with people on various “mountain-tops”. So the phrase has come to mean a moment of transcendence – or epiphany; and in particular an experience of significant revelation given by God.

It was on the Mountains of Ararat that Noah’s ark came to rest after the Flood (see Genesis 8:4). God made a covenant with Noah there. ...On Mount Sinai (also known as Mt. Horeb) God revealed His character to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 19:16-20:12). (Moses returned glowing)...

Jesus taught His disciples on the Mount of Olives (see Matthew 24:3) and He was transfigured on a mountain (see Mark 9:2). It shouldn’t surprise us that Moses and Elijah (who both had their own mountain-top experiences) were seen talking with Jesus on that mountain...

So Mountains are symbolic of God's revelation to man. God gives the “mountain-top experience” in order to sustain people as they go down into the valley! This revelation is always intended to help us journey with Him more closely on the road ahead.”¹

“When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments he was a changed man. He had come close and talked to God. And the experience was so profound that he couldn’t hide it. The light was literally shining through him, and the people gathered at the base of the mountain could see it.”² I wonder if that is what it was like for Jesus when he came off the mountaintop to see his disciples on the water.

I found it interesting that after feeding the thousands who followed him into the wilderness, Jesus commands the disciples to head across the sea without him while he remains on shore to send the crowds on their way and then spend some time in communion with his Father on the mountain. Jesus chooses to go and be alone, to meet with God on the mountaintop. He sends the disciples away, as if he wants them to find their own faith and trust for awhile.

¹ <http://www.beaconlight.co.uk/faqs/MountainTopExperiences>

² Stillspeakkiing daily devotional “Attraction, Not Promotion” Emily C. Heath

“While the disciples are crossing, a storm arises that threatens to engulf them. They spend the better part of an anxious night navigating the waves, and in the early hours of the morning Jesus strides across the water to meet them.

Mistaking Jesus for a wave-walking *ghost*, the disciples grow even more alarmed as he draws near. (*Perhaps Jesus is ‘shining’ like Moses did when he descended from the mountain top*). In response, Jesus reassures them that it is he who is coming to them. His encouragement works... and then some.”³

Peter is so moved by the sight of Jesus that he asked to join him and walk on the water himself. Peter at first steps out with confidence and then he turned to fear and loses heart. Peter calls out “Lord Save Me.” And Jesus reaches out and rescues the sinking Peter.

Disappointed in Peter Jesus remarks on his lack of faith, it’s at this moment that the disciples see Jesus once again as if for the first time, confessing, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

“Which is interesting, when you think about it. *As Lose points out*, Jesus had just fed thousands upon thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing both divine power and divine compassion. And yet it’s here, at this moment of extremity, when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.

And so it is with the disciples as it often is with us. When things are flourishing and going well - we don’t recognize God with us. In fact we often find ourselves complaining about the things of life that don’t really matter, and even sending away those in need. And yet when we are desperate or struggling, we are more willing to open our eyes, and call out to the Holy and others for help.

Lose writes “I’m not totally sure why this is, but I think part of it is that we spend a fair amount of our time and energy trying to establish a stable, safe, and secure life, both for us and those we love. There’s nothing wrong with that on one level. From the beginning God desires that we flourish, and stability promotes growth. But all too often we note our modest success and assume we no longer need God, or at least forget how much a part of our lives God is and desires to be. Or perhaps we confuse safety and stability with abundant life. Either way, we may forget how much we depend on God. Until tragedy strikes in the form of illness and job loss or the end of a relationship or some grave mistake we’ve made, and suddenly our ongoing need for God becomes painfully clear.”

However one of the gifts of scripture and this story in particular is that it reminds us that no matter how and when we discover our need for God, God responds. “Just as Jesus reassures the disciples and reaches out to grab hold of Peter, so also God responds to us with compassion and support. Second, and I’d argue more importantly, God not only responds to our need, but actually desires that we seek to live lives of abundance and courage. Notice that Jesus actually commanded the disciples to cross the sea to go ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both sea

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-9a-whole-hearted-faith/>

and storm. And while some commentators may suggest that Peter's request to join Jesus upon the waves is a mark impetuous foolishness, I suspect there was some delight in Jesus' summons to Peter to come out from the boat.

I'm also struck by Jesus' three-fold response to the disciples. First, he urges them to "take heart." Second, he reveals his presence with, among, and for them. For while we translate what Jesus utters as "It is I," the Greek is more sparse, succinct, and significant: "I Am." I suspect that neither the disciples nor Matthew's audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name. Third, having revealed his presence and identity, Jesus then encourages the disciples once more to leave fear behind and live what Brené Brown calls "whole-hearted" lives."⁴

This is at the core of my faith and belief that God still desires for us to live whole-hearted, abundant lives. "God desires, that is, that we trust that God is with us and for us and thereby live with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationship, seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us, all the while remembering that even when we overlook God's presence yet God is always there, sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears, sometimes sending us out ahead, and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace."⁵

This story reminds us that God is with us even (or perhaps most importantly) in the difficult parts of our lives, responding to our fears and cries for help with the promise of presence and comfort. And at the same time, just as Jesus did with his disciples God has hopes and dreams for us – both as individuals and as a community of faith. At all times God is encouraging us to cross rough waters and even to step out of the boat in faith, trusting that God is there to grab hold of us in need. I don't know what each of your individual challenges and fears are but know that God is with you in your needs. As a congregation I know a little more about some of our hopes, challenges and fears and I want to remind us that God is with us in our needs, calling us to live whole-hearted lives of courage and hope.

Lose writes "God is eager to respond to our deepest needs, God also invites us to more adventuresome lives of faith as well. God wants more for us, frankly, than simply safety and stability, and therefore God calls us to stretch, grown, and live into the abundant life God has promised us, trusting that God is always with us."

So I invite you to join me as we do some wave walking together in the months and years to come as individuals and a community of faith, may we live whole-hearted, abundant faith-filled lives. Amen.

⁴ IBID

⁵ IBID