

Sermon Proper 14A 2017
1 Kings 19:9-18
Psalm 85:8-13
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33
Bill Watson
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Hearing the conclusion of the passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans might make us pause and wonder. Especially with this Sunday being what many in the church call, "back to school Sunday." As Paul appeals for teachers, as we will be doing, one might even wonder if there is some kind of collusion between LCS, St. John's, and the Lectionary. No, there is no collusion, just coincidence. But it does make us pause and consider.

Today's lessons might be titled coming to know/experience God and Jesus. The lessons focus on this experience of encountering the divine. From the OT, Elijah has an Epiphany on the holy mountain, Mt. Horeb. This the mountain that other passages refer to as Mt. Sinai. Interestingly, archeologists and Biblical scholars are not completely sure which mountain in the Middle East this is. That is tough for us concrete thinkers who desire so much to locate God. The holy mountain was where Moses encountered God, receiving the law and commandments as we heard last Sunday. This is the same holy mountain to which Elijah has fled for his life from the evil ones, Jezebel and King Ahab.

The mountain top experience begins with natural calamity which surrounds the divine appearance. But God is not in the dramatic wind, earthquake or fire. Instead God is present in the "sound of sheer silence." Or as the REB expresses it, "a faint murmuring sound." God's manifestation seems almost insignificant.

Today, we aren't much into silence. We are into screens, images, audio, headphones, videos and binge watching. Yet, Elijah encountered God in silence. The silence calls Elijah forth and in this theophany Elijah hears God speak.

Our Gospel passage is Matthew's unique version of a storm on the water story. The disciples are caught up in a great storm and fear for their lives. Into this fearful setting the divine love appears in the person of Jesus. Jesus reveals himself offering the divine name, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." "It is I" is the divine name.

Jesus reaches out to Peter and saves him. Which links to our passage from Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Paul in his letter goes on to say, “The word is near you.” Do you believe this?

What do we believe? How have you come to know Jesus in your life? Are you able to say, “Jesus is Lord.” I think most of us are searching for answers to these questions. As we move through the journey of our lives we constantly return to these questions. As events occur, we wonder and ask, “Where is God in this?”

As a culture we are reluctant to speak about our faith when there are some parts that we are still struggling with or aren’t sure about. But struggling with scripture, struggling with how God is present in our lives is just how the divine love has arranged it. God could have made us automatons, hard wired in our responses to God’s love and call. God could be present in a more active and visible way. Requiring our allegiance, response and devotion. But such a relationship is not one based on love. In a loving relationship we choose to commit ourselves to the one we love. This is a conscious decision that we make and commit to. We are not compelled. Love doesn’t compel us and neither does God. We get to choose.

Yet, scripture has high hopes for us. We have a story to tell at the same time that we are continuing to learn the story, continuing to experience that deeply mysterious divine presence in every aspect of our lives. If we don’t feel we can share the story until we have all the answers we will just stay mute. But friends, working on the answers is the journey of life.

When I was a full time physician I did not have all the answers. The way forward was not always clear. There were always multiple possible explanations or processes at work, some well understood and some completely baffling. Does that mean I did not speak or try to arrive at a plan of care with my patients? Should we not be training new generations of medical professionals since so much still awaits discovery? Of course not. Yet, for many of us, we aren’t sure that we have a faith story to share unless we have all the answers.

Well, scripture is not very encouraging about having all the answers. Peter lived with Jesus for three years and still his faith failed him at critical points and times. And Peter was no different from the other disciples. The Gospel of Matthew’s stunning conclusion is known as the Great Commission. The great

sending forth, the ultimate graduation and commissioning service. Yet, what does Matthew say as he sets this dramatic scene? “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” (Mt. 28:17). Some who were seeing and hearing the resurrected Jesus on the holy mountain doubted!

Some were still wrestling with their faith in the resurrection, even in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. God did not smite them. Jesus did not say we can't go forward until we are all on the same page. We must be a team united or we don't go at all. No, Jesus went on to say, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” From there, the church began and has continued. We stand in a long line of disciples who each had their own doubts and questions. Yet, they went forth sharing the Good News, that God loves everyone and in turn calls us to love one another. We are to go forth also, and we mustn't let God down. The events of this weekend in C'ville remind us that good has to take a stand if it is to work against evil and the sinful desires that humanity is capable of.

So, is God at work in our lives? Have any of us been to the holy mountain and experienced God face to face? Have any been struck blind on the road to Damascus? Have any tried to walk on water and felt the arms of Jesus lift them from the waves? Well, scripture doesn't help us very much in this light. Contrasting the dramatic stories of scripture with our more muted and perhaps uncertain experience may not give us the confidence or answers we desire.

But we do have experiences of the divine. And much more powerfully than just seeing a beautiful sunset or a rainbow after a storm. If that is as close as we get to divine revelation no wonder we don't feel we have much to say. But I believe that God is at work in all of our lives. What does that look like? Well, that presence is as scripture says, the still small voice. And it's a shame that we aren't much into still small voices. No silent movies for us, we are into video on demand. That is quick, short, flashy, eye catching, immediate, and authentic. How in the world can God compete?

Well, the way that God has always been present. In the still small voice, the love that surrounds us, the beckoning and wooing of desire and hope, in the words and acts of those who love us deeply mirroring God's love for us.

In my life, these are some of the experiences that I understand to be encounters as manifestations of the Spirit. Of a woman who comes to speak with me, unsure of what she believes. She is exploring, wondering, questioning. I believe that God is actively wooing her in her discernment.

Of visiting someone at WC only to head out to my car and encounter Norvell Thompson and her broken arm. The divine love brought us together. Coincidence or the work of the Holy Spirit? You can decide.

So whether it is running into someone. Meeting a new friend or classmate. A new neighbor moving next door. An engagement. A pregnancy. I believe the Holy Spirit is somehow at work in these and all activities. God's love is a powerful creative force for good. Bringing new life and vitality. New relationships and possibilities.

God's activity in the world goes beyond what some might call serendipity. Consider Lynchburg Grows and the St. John's Greenhouse is a story of resurrection. The greenhouses were abandoned, dead, and awaiting tear down. But a vision materialized. Was God in that inspiration? Then some folks at St. John's caught the vision. And so many of you pitched in to make the resurrection occur. It wasn't magic but hard work. And it continues to be hard work. Now the St. John's Greenhouse is a profound Christian witness. We grow food to feed people just as Jesus fed the hungry. What about the whole mission of LG? It is a philanthropic non-profit but I can assure you that God has been in the lives of everyone working in any aspect of its efforts, known or unknown. God does not force our response and never will. Love is never offered in such a fashion. But God's love undergirds such efforts.

We have been saved by Jesus. Not by anything we have done or will do. Faith is a gift. If we are fortunate we come to know this. Our lives and our stories are critically important. Reflecting upon our experience we may come to know where Jesus has been present. Where Jesus has made himself known to us. This is the story we have to share. And Paul in Romans is challenging us to share our stories.

So as we prepare for another school year, we call for teachers. So must we have had an experience of theophany to believe or to teach? Must we have all the answers? No way, we don't have to and we may never have all the answers we

wish we had. But we can share how we have come to know the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Here is an idea. As you end your day and prepare for bed, ask yourself the question, “Where might the Holy Spirit have been present today?” Then reflect back on your day and see what thoughts occur. Inviting God into your discernment in this way might reveal some surprising insights. As Paul reminds us, “The Word is very near you.” With reflection, we may come to know more clearly how God is present in our lives each and every day. And that is good news that we can share with others.