



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, February 26, 2017

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Exodus 24:12-18 | Psalm 2 | II Peter 1:16-21 | Matthew 17:1-9

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

From the moment Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness, all the way through St. John's hair-raising revelations, there's hardly any human being in the Bible that is glad to get close to God. The view of the Almighty we see in the Scriptures is that of a God who is better kept at a safe distance. Whether these feelings sprang from a sense of apprehension, or insignificance, or shame, standing face to face with God is something that people we meet in the Bible were not eager to do.

That was a long time ago. What is it that we feel about God today? We certainly don't have God showing up in a pillar of fire, or in a blinding white cloud. With the luxury of being selective in our reading of the Bible, we can focus on the gentle ways God's presence is made known – the still small voice, the good shepherd, the companion with whom we walk in the cool of the evening. From there we can safely seek a pleasant closeness with God which our ancestors couldn't begin to imagine. For those ancient people who lived through encounters with God, the response was overwhelmingly one of dread. When we speak of being in God's presence, when our prayers give voice to a longing for intimacy with the divine, do we really know what we're asking?

The disciples who accompanied Jesus on an afternoon hike up Mt. Tabor thought they understood the meaning of God's presence in their midst. A few days before this excursion, Peter proclaimed his certainty that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Now here he is, climbing a mountain with the God who created the mountain. Most people would find such a situation to be, at least, uncomfortable, if not incomprehensible.

How Peter intellectualized all of this, is a mystery. Perhaps he didn't even try; Peter tended to react from his gut, not his head. Jesus told Peter that only divine intervention could lead him to see and confess who Jesus is. So, maybe Peter was content to live with the contradictions and simply enjoy an afternoon in the country with some good friends. That was fine, until the comfortable contradictions were wiped away, and Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, was revealed for what he is.

At the Transfiguration the patriarch Moses and the prophet Elijah appear in fulfillment of predictions of the coming of the Messiah. Then to drive the point home, in good Old Testament fashion, a bright cloud envelops the scene and the voice of the Majestic Glory proclaims Jesus as the Son, the beloved, the one with whom God is pleased, the one to whom we should listen. Peter and his companions react as nearly everyone else in the Bible does when they meet God. "They were overcome by fear." When God was neatly settled in their little minds, the disciples feared nothing. But when they met God face to face, the situation was quite different. Then, like everyone who had gone before them, they had to deal with God because the distance was eliminated.

We don't commonly encounter voices from clouds. We would seek a medical intervention for those who did. We don't usually see God in ways that scare us. We wouldn't even try; no one wants to be frightened. Yet the God who spoke to Peter from a cloud is the same God that speaks to our hearts, today. So what's different? What has changed? God hasn't, but maybe we have. Or maybe it is God who has changed us.

When the cloud passed and the voice was silent, Jesus touched the disciples and said, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus." And their fear was gone. Fear, as the defining element of the human experience with God, had been taken away. It need not have any power over us. That is an incredible legacy we have inherited. It should make our entire existence different.

Yet in some circles what counts for power, even in this day and age, is the ability to scare people. The more fear that can be spread the more power a person, or a way of thinking, amasses. It's how you get people to buy things they probably don't need. It is how enemies are controlled or silenced by forcing them into an isolation cells defined by belief, or background, or way of life. It's how people gain dominance and hold on to it. It sounds like some sinister force at work in the world, but it's not, or at least not completely. If something scares us, if someone manipulates us into acting against our nature or against our values, it is, at least in part, because we have allowed ourselves to be frightened. We have forgotten

the lesson the disciples learned, the gift they received and passed on to us on that mountain top with Jesus.

Like the people of the Bible we may, at times, feel insignificant or powerless. But we have also met God face to face in the love of God's Son, a love we are called to share with a world filled with fear. That's what makes us different; it makes us powerful. We don't need to be frightened by God nor anything else. Fear is not of God, love is. That is what real power is and it is ours to claim. Jesus said, "Get up and do not to be afraid." Now, the question is: Will we listen to him?