

From the Pulpit

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“Forty Days and Forty Nights”

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9;
Psalm 2

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A communion meditation delivered by Janine Wilson, Assoc. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2nd, 2014.

**“Forty Days and Forty Nights”
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9; Psalm 2**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Dedicated with thanksgiving to Jenny and Julia, two of my models of faith -
always shining in the light of God.

Are there any mountain climbers here today? You are leaders in helping us embrace the joy of the mountains. My family and I are closest to the Smokey Mountains for remembering some key family events and Matthew and Aaron, both Eagle Scouts and Joel a climber as well, tell great stories of Mt. Baldy. Today though, the closest shared experience of the mountains that we all have in common, comes to us from the other side of the world, through athletes of so many nations moving in harmony with the beautiful backdrop of snowcapped mountains in Russia. It is a challenge, but in spite of the horrible turn of current events their leader and military forces, the beauty and amazement of the mountains still remains true.

Although today’s biblical mountains are not capped with snow, the air is still rarified. Moses is climbs up one mountain in Exodus and Jesus and his disciples climb up the mountain in the gospel of Matthew. Both journeys include restlessness in their interpretation. And part of the good news is that we don’t have to be climbers, family or Olympians, to know that geography often serves as a marker for both biblical and life events.

Before I go further, I have to tell you that some clergy dread this Sunday. No matter where you look in the readings, there are bigger than life things going on: today we have kings and fiery mountains, we have fog and the look of fire; we even have the voice of God and Peter up there in the rarified air babbling when God interrupts him - -- and then we have people politely sitting in pews waiting for an explanation. Who wants to take all that on to explain? I think my own draw to it is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book, God in Search of Man, calls “radical

amazement”. David Brooks brought it back to mind just a few weeks ago when he spoke of it in his column: “Our goal” Heschel writes, “should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal. ...To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/28/opinion/brooks-alone-yet-not-alone.html?hp&rref=opinion&r=0>

Watching the world around us over the past few months – watching the grace and power of athletes on one television station and Syria falling apart on another demonstrates things can change in the blink of an eye. We need to keep our eyes wide open. God calls us to be a people of peace and a people of radical amazement. God knows, THIS is the time to be amazed at what we have, not what we think belongs to us.

Whether we hear it as a mythical event or a directive from God, Moses and Jesus both catch us off guard. What will it take to wake us up? I believe it calls for us to open our heart to what is happening – to wonder about God’s call to see, feel, know and respond. God is not shy with us this morning; God is here, guiding us up the mountain to witness the power and spirit that are called into being when we are startled into seeing God is with us in Jesus the Christ.

We hear it in the choice words when Moses is told to just sit there – wait there – the verb translated here can also be translated as ‘just be’...just be there Moses. Like mothers teaching their children how to cross the road – stop, look and listen; and fathers teaching the art and beauty of working with wood – knowing when to turn, sand, polish and admire every step of the way. Just wait here Moses and Sandy, Bob and Mary, Alan and Sebastian. Just watch and wait and I will tell where to go and what to do when the time comes.

I am not always a patient person. The idea of God telling Moses or any of us to wait is somewhat contrary to what I or we have in mind. So *what does it take for you to just be and what do you expect to come out of it?* Maybe this morning’s gifts are not all about the glitz, glamour or the adventure of the mountaintop experiences we have.

Don’t get me wrong – I think the mountaintop experiences are amazing. Being outside helps us to notice God is God and we are not. Here we can see Christ differently and receive our marching orders and our hope.

Listen to the words of Eugene Peterson of the event in The Message:
[Matthew 17:1-13] Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.

4 Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?”

5 While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”

6-8 When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus.

9 Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

10 The disciples, meanwhile, were asking questions. “Why do the religion scholars say that Elijah has to come first?”

11-13 Jesus answered, “Elijah does come and get everything ready. I’m telling you, Elijah has already come but they didn’t know him when they saw him. They

treated him like dirt, the same way they are about to treat the Son of Man.” That’s when the disciples realized that all along he had been talking about John the Baptizer.

[<http://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/matthew/passage.aspx?q=matthew+17:1-9>]

Now that’s amazing!

I would like to be there with Moses, and Jesus; with his disciples and with Elijah and John the Baptizer.

I’d like to ask them what has scared them the most of all. Was it when Moses killed the man or when God forgave him? Was it when the people refused to follow or when they all headed out into the unknown together? Was it all the things they knew they had to do up until now, or the fear of the unknown of the restless people and new leaders that waited down the mountain for them now?

If Herschel is right and what we need is to live in amazement – then following in the footsteps of Moses and Jesus puts us smack in the middle of it!

What if every now and then we yearn for things we just can’t have – but God know exactly what we need? God knows we need a few foggy moments to just ‘be’, to hold on to as reference points, to carry us through what is coming next? In a nutshell, that is pretty much what happened when Jesus and his disciples went down the mountain.

It seems all of the characters in God’s blessings today needed something remarkable to remember and trust in the difficult times that were just ahead waiting for them. They needed to know when all is said and done; God will be there with them and with us.

Jesus’ closest friends abandoned him, ran for the hills and totally forgot everything they knew to be true and just. (So much for their rocky mountain high!) The same happened for Moses as he descended and discovered his closest companions were busy creating their own idol to replace the God on High, just as Moses hand delivering the Word of God to them! The mountain time of just being with God, seems lost at first glance...until....until there was time and space to look back on it.

One of the crazy wonderful things about sitting around shooting the breeze with Christians is when they are comfortable enough to start telling their stories. You know the kind that start out awkward, a little fearful, wondering if you will still talk with them after they have been so vulnerable and told you a truth that was too big to be taken seriously outside of a truth or dare game. The stories that begin by answering questions like, "Have you ever seen or heard God before?"

Sometimes it's hard to stay quiet when it's first underway. My friend Lisa was sitting next to me at one of those long tables in fellowship hall just a few years ago. We were mid-way through a Sunday school lesson when she began to share her story of meeting God in the middle of a highway going home one night. She swears she heard God's voice. She stopped the car. In her retelling, she looked straight at me and said, "I can tell, it's happened to you too." I just smiled. She went on with her story.

The amazing thing is that not a single person at the table showed even the slightest sign of disbelief. It was just the opposite. They wanted to know more. They leaned in to hear and encouraged her to tell them what it was like. And she did. She was lost, afraid of running out of gas, not at all clear which road to take and it all happened before cell phones...

In an earlier event, another woman shared when she was standing at the end of her brother's hospital bed where he lay dying, and talked about him opening his eyes and talking – not to her, but to people in their family who had died years before. He called them by name, including Jesus – as he looked at the end of the bed, nodded his head and smiled. There are so many possible views of visions and calls, but only one took hold that Sunday morning.

We need to be amazed, startled, jarred off dead center every now and then to see what is within us and around us. And God knows we need hope for the journey as well.

Think back about some of the wonderful and bizarre twists and plot changes of your life and of people you know. I heard one a while back about a guy who changed his whole career because he saw a bumper sticker on the car ahead of him at the stoplight and somehow he knew God was telling him to go become a missionary, open a soup kitchen, or just go and something with grace in it. It pried him off dead center and then he changed his life for the good, against all odds. It is our call to trust and be

amazed at God's hope for us and for God's world. I probably would not have encouraged him to change his life on it, but I'm glad he didn't ask – in the end, things have turned out well for him.

What becomes visible through God in the midst of their mountaintop experiences can become God's peculiar treasure down the road.

Moses followers broke all the rules they had once learned, but in the end the presence of the living God brought them to the other side. And Jesus' disciples forgot everything that he had taught them when things got rough. They turned away, sold him out and ran. But in the end, their time on the mountain made perfect sense and looking back, it equipped them to help change the world.

Jesus was the Christ revealed – all in God's good time. Looking back after his death, they knew everything they had experienced was 'righter than rain' as my grandmother used to tell me. They knew he was the Son of God, the Redeemer, the beloved. And they gave the rest of their lives living out their call to help others see it too. May we remember he is with us always, working with us and even through us - to the glory of God, amen.

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