

“Greater than can be Thought”

Mark 9:2-9

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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On this day we celebrate the 188th birthday of Washington Gladden, a father of social justice ministry and foundation for the ministry that has defined First Congregational Church. I dedicate this sermon to his memory.

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Let us pray: O God, we receive such abundance in this life, yet there are times when we feel inadequate and in need of your assurance and blessing. As I share my meanings of Jesus’ teachings, may there be a blessing for those who receive them and may each of us be transformed by your presence among us this day. Amen.

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For literally thousands of years, humans have been trying to explain God. God is a mystery, but it is far too simple to stop there. We call Divinity by many names – God, Allah, Yahweh, Buddha, Christ, Tao, the Goddess, the Great Spirit, Creator, and any number of other names. The Hindu tradition says there is only one Rama and Rama has a thousand names. Other religions say that there are an infinite number of names for God. When my father returned from a mission trip in Nicaragua, he share a better understanding of *mucho religio, uno Deo* – many religions, one God. It was 11th century philosopher Anselm who offered the argument, “God is something than which nothing greater can be thought.” By “God” he meant that which is absolutely unsurpassable, that which cannot conceivably be improved upon, that which is inherently spiritual.

Explaining God and interpreting God's messages, elicits fear in me. What if I get it wrong, because I probably will, what will that mean? In my search for God, I have sometimes personified God as father, mother, parent, friend, lover, gardener, architect, chess player, potter, weaver, composer. In my love of music, I especially resonate with God the composer. I can see the music of the great symphony taking shape, arranged and rearranged by directors, nuanced by players in the orchestra, given voice by performers in the opera, energized by the 'boys in the band'. The notes, flat on the page, come to life in sharp dissonance and resonance, intoning beauty and strength, peace, and disharmony. What has been created and interpreted becomes both raucously heart thumping, foot stomping, and soothingly mind calming evocation of the spirit. Yet, as Anselm so aptly tells us, "God is greater than composer, or any other images I have listed or not listed. What great fun to play with these metaphors though! In recent years the personification I attribute to God is through those I encounter – the presence of God in you and the person sitting next to you.

More than any other way, I encounter God through the action of God. From the very beginning and throughout the Bible, it is through the activity of God that we have knowledge of God. We speak of the action of God, working in transactional and transformational ways to affect creation. In our praying, we ask for God to heal or to alter, and we express thanksgiving for what God has already done. In Jesus' most powerful stories, God is not mentioned at all, yet we would be blind not to see the action of God in healings, exorcisms, and parables. In the action of God is the experience of God.

One of God's actions is to speak. God speaks even before there are humans. God's speech calls humans into being: "God said: 'Let us make humankind...'" Later God speaks directly to humans: "Be fruitful and multiply."

As we say in the United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking," not only in Scripture or to our ancestors but to us, today. But while God speaks, humans struggle to hear. At times, God must repeat Godself several times: In the

exodus, God calls, “Moses, Moses!” Sometimes God’s voice is heard loudly and clearly, such as at the baptism of Jesus and here on the mountain, other times it is a ‘still small voice’.

In my vocational life, I experienced God’s speaking through the voices of patients and family members at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. In recent days, I enjoy the freedom to travel and to experience God’s great diversity. I love exploring the vastness of the world and I especially enjoy a good walk in the woods. These are my mountaintop experiences. Whether it’s looking over the rim of a volcano in Guatemala to see the flow of red-hot lava, watching eagles play over the waters of Puget Sound, wondering at the size and power of bison leisurely strolling the roads of South Dakota, or feeling the sun break through bare leafed trees in one of our Metro parks, I am awed by the character of God in all of creation.

Peter, James, and John were on the mountaintop with Jesus. Unexpectedly, without warning or announcement, they experienced the mystery of God. To experience the mystery of God is to have a spiritual encounter. Some may even call it mystical. Although the magnitude of the experience frightened them, they wanted to hold onto the experience to make it last, much like you or I might wish to preserve our beautiful, unique, and once in a lifetime experiences. We might reach for our smartphone to take photos to share with friends and family on social media. (take pics) This is the world we live in. The impulse to record and share, building up our digital images of self, is strong, but it’s not exactly new.

This week’s Gospel passage reminds me that the human desire to contain moments existed before modern technology. It was the sometimes anxious and impetuous Peter who acknowledged the importance of the moment and suggested that building shrines was the right thing to do. His offer is both a recognition of the holy and an attempt to contain it. I love Peter’s response because this could also be what I would want to do. Recognizing that I was experiencing something beyond my understanding, I would reach out to catch and hold it.

That moment on the mountain was a miraculous meeting with God. Peter, James, and John were good Jews who had strong concepts of God and believed that God should be set apart to be revered and worshiped, as in a temple. They glimpsed the divinity in Jesus' fully human flesh, and they were quite baffled and terrified. Then clouds descended and God addressed Peter, James, and John in the darkness with a version of God's message to Jesus at his baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" I think he's telling them "you're missing the point here, pay attention to this man."

The disciples seem to be both afraid and drawn. The offer to build tabernacles shows their desire for permanence. Maybe, like us, they wanted to preserve the mountaintop experience. Yet, today's passage teaches us something important about a life of faith. We are not to stay on the mountaintop. God instructs us to listen to Christ. Just a chapter earlier, Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:24). Listen to him. We are to go out into the world, not stay in the temple.

Lent is coming. But for today, we are on the mountaintop. Rather than jump ahead to Ash Wednesday and Lent or the cross, can we stay on the mountain and reflect on our reactions to divine encounters? Do we reach for our phones to record the sunset, the view, the baby's face that took shape in nine short months? Do we seek to contain wonder or do we seek to absorb awe into our hearts?

Change is also coming. We anticipate that the open position for faith formation will be filled. We anticipate the retirement of our senior minister and the end of Rev Joanna's term as designated minister. We anticipate that we will have a full contingent of spiritual leadership. These changes will bring with them revelations of the divine at work in our lives and church. I do not yet know what is in store for us or who will lead us in nine months. I trust and have every confidence, though, that God will be in this place to reveal God's self to us. I have confidence that the ministry of social justice that is a cornerstone of First Church will not fall away, but will be strong.

I have confidence that the bonds of relationship in this congregation and community will grow, that we will join together to hear God calling us to embody the teachings of Jesus in Columbus, Ohio. And I am confident that the example of Washington Gladden will continue to guide us with faith, fairness, and friendship.

Peter, James, and John encountered wonder on that mountain. The ancient Israelites wandering in the desert, as well as the Lord's Prayer, have given us a model for how to deal with wonder. What would happen if we accepted wonder as our daily bread, never collecting more than we need, just for today? What would happen if we trusted that God will continue to reveal Godself to us in everyday experiences, not just at the mountaintops? Would we be free to drink wonder more deeply? Would we relinquish our need to control wonder and the future?

Our encounters with wonder give us a context for God's vastness and vision. We are meant to take that knowledge with us into our everyday lives, back down into the valleys of life. But let's not rush it. For today, let's enjoy the view from the mountain, drinking in wonder as if it were vital, because it is.

This is my prayer for us: May we open our ears to God's speaking. May we sit in the mystical moments of God's presence. May we be filled with spiritual grace. Open our hearts to see God's blessings, the encouragement of our friends, the support of our family, and the bond of love that unites us all. Amen.

