

Faith Mennonite Church
February 3, 2007 ~ Transfiguration Sunday

Beyond the Brightness
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

When I was growing up, my friends and I would occasionally go to the “echo house.” This was an old abandoned structure with no roof but thick concrete walls. When we would go inside and yell, our voices would bounce back and forth from wall to wall. As young children who didn’t completely understand the science of sound waves, that place had a magical quality, giving our voices a new sound. It was as if our words had a life of their own.

Although our Old Testament and Gospel texts were written about events that occurred over a thousand years apart, there seems to be an echoing, a reverberation of sights, sounds, and even characters between these two texts. Both texts are about an encounter with God – about hearing God’s voice and finding one’s identity in that encounter.

The Exodus 24 story takes place in the desert of Sinai where Moses had led the Hebrew people from Egypt. Moses had already had a number of different encounters with God. You’ll remember that it all started for him when he was in exile, having fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian task-master who had mistreated a Hebrew slave. He was working as a shepherd, and one day while he was out alone with his sheep he caught sight of a bush that was on fire but wasn’t consumed by the fire. When he approached the bush, he heard God speak to him, calling him back to Egypt.

Between that first encounter and our story today, Moses had numerous encounters with God and he often felt that God was calling him to things much larger than he was capable of doing. But God didn’t relent and Moses, who originally complained that he lacked communication skills, managed quite well in negotiating with Pharaoh, leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt, and then being the go-between for God and this rag-tag, and often unruly, band as they wandered through the desert, seeking a new home and forging an identity as a free people.

Moses had more than one experience of being called by God to climb the mountain and to receive God’s message for the people. In today’s text, Moses’ encounter unfolds in two stages. He goes up the mountain and waits for six days while a cloud, described as God’s glory, rests upon the mountain. On the seventh day, God calls him into the cloud, where he remains for 40 days and 40 nights. We’re not told what happened to Moses during that period of time, but from the perspective of the folks on the ground the cloud on the mountain appeared to be a devouring fire. They must have wondered if they’d ever see their leader again.

Ironically, while Moses was on the mountain with the express purpose of receiving God’s law and commandments for the people, reflecting the essence of who God was and what God desired for the creation of a new people, the people became impatient and asked Aaron to create a god that they could worship and touch. The God who had liberated them from Egypt, who had

provided manna and quail in the wilderness, and whose glory now burned in the cloud over the mountain, didn't hold their attention and was somehow incomprehensible.

Now, fast forward to our Gospel text. In the chapter that precedes the transfiguration account, Jesus is having some serious encounters, first with the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious parties who didn't recognize or trust Jesus' authority, and then with the disciples. The topic is Jesus' identity. After the disciples report that people have various ideas about who Jesus, the Son of Man, is – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or another prophet—Peter boldly endorses Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But even so, Peter can't make sense of Jesus' prediction that he will undergo great suffering and be killed and then be raised again. Like the children of Israel, he is confounded by who God is and what God asks of him. Jesus said: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25)

In timing that's reminiscent of Moses' six-day wait for God's invitation to enter the cloud, the gospel writer places the beginning of the transfiguration account “six days later”—after the discussions of Jesus' identity. Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain. Unlike Moses' experience, this time there was no waiting. (Jesus, we will recall, had his 40-day and 40-night experience of testing at the beginning of his ministry.) And whereas Moses was alone when he was in the splendor of God's presence, the disciples are privy to this deeply personal and transcendent moment when Jesus is transfigured before them, his face and his clothing shining.

If the brightness wasn't enough, suddenly, Moses and Elijah, one of Israel's prophets, appear and begin talking to Jesus. Peter, who's never at a loss for words, reacts much like the children of Israel did while Moses was on the mountain. While the children of Israel wanted a visible god to worship, Peter wanted to create a shrine, to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. “It's good to be here!” This scene fit perfectly well with what he envisioned when he had proclaimed Jesus as the Son of the living God. If he could keep Jesus here, with Moses and Elijah as his top advisors, the beginnings of a new kingdom would be in place and there'd be no need for this suffering and dying nonsense.

But the brightness rapidly receded as a cloud overshadowed them and they heard a voice: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!” Peter and his comrades instantly changed from starry-eyed building contractors ready to enshrine wonder to men trembling in fear. And before they knew it they were on their way back down the mountain, no doubt puzzling over what had just happened. But there was no doubt they had to take Jesus seriously for they had heard the voice of God, and it echoed the words of Isaiah where the beloved is the servant. Their marching orders were to listen, to accept what Jesus had been saying.

Fast forward once more, 2000 years to the present, where we're on the eve of the liturgical season of Lent. What of these ancient texts and stories echoes within us? Or, which of the reverberations has gone silent? In the modern age, many of us struggle to find the

transcendent moments, to actually experience a whisper, a murmur of the divine. Over the Christmas holiday one of our youth told me that, although the church is very much their home, they struggle intellectually with the concept of faith because they've never had a personal experience of the presence of God.

Perhaps we look in the wrong places. And perhaps that's why Elijah is part of the transfiguration story. Elijah was esteemed in the history of Israel as a great prophet. He had performed a miracle bringing food and life to the widow of Zarephath during a time of famine. He had battled evil King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and defeated the priests of the god Baal. But even after experiencing God's presence in these experiences he felt entirely alone and went to hide out in a cave. God called him out of the cave onto the mountain and said that God would pass by. That event is described this way in 1 Kings 19: Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him.

The word that Elijah received in the silence was much like the word that Jesus spoke to the disciples after the transfiguration – go, return, continue to do what you're doing. There is a Latin American saying, "*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*" There is no path before us; we create the path as we walk.

Our walk of faith is just that – a walk, a moving forward, by faith, not having all the answers or always feeling God's presence, but trusting that as we take up the call of servanthood, giving ourselves to and for others, Jesus will walk with us and we will find him in those actions, in those who walk with us, and in the silence. Let us create the path of faith as we walk in faith.

Joetta Schlabach