***SIGNS OF A DIVINE ENCOUNTER***

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Texts: Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36

As my computer screen popped to life one day this week, a picture appeared of a ruddy, rugged mountain amid a barren desert landscape. According to the note beneath the picture (courtesy of Microsoft), the mountain is Mt. Sinai, holy site to all three Abrahamic religions, and the setting for the passage from Exodus that I read a moment ago. The picture shows it to be a desolate peak, and from the description in Exodus, it seems that little has changed in the 3,000+ years since the Israelites arrived there, except perhaps for erosion from the unrelenting wind, sand, and sun of the desert. It was at the foot of that mountain that the Israelites gathered to await the return of Moses from Sinai’s summit.

Moses had been up there forty days and forty nights and that was a long time to wait! The Israelites had waited there once before, had waited for Moses to return from the mountain until they tired of waiting and tired of being faithful. When Moses finally came down with God’s commandments in hand the first time, he found them worshiping a golden calf; so angry was he with their unfaithfulness that he smashed the stone tablets that held the commandments, had the golden idol ground to dust, and made the people drink gold-dusted water. There at the foot of the mountain, the people learned to fear the Lord, learned that God would tolerate worship of no other god, but learned too that the Lord was merciful and forgiving and more patient with them than they had been with God. For after chastising them for their unfaithfulness, Moses went back up the mountain with a blank set of stone tablets in hand to see if there might be another word from the Lord to share with God’s idolatrous chosen people.

I don’t know that we wait much better than the Israelites! We are impatient people, and the longer we wait the antsier and sometimes crankier we get – whether it be waiting to arrive at a destination (Are we there yet!) or waiting for medical test results or for healing to happen or for a sermon to end or for a pandemic to be over. Of all the things for which folks ask me to pray at hospital bedsides, patience might just top the list; we know that we do not wait well, and our 5G, microwave world has perhaps made us more impatient yet.

This pandemic has severely tested our ability to wait patiently, faithfully, responsibly for the virus to give up its grip upon us and upon our lives. Some folks have thrown up their hands and said, “I am done with this virus!” and then given up trying anymore. Some have persevered grudgingly or reluctantly. Some have endured with grace and good humor and a “do what you have to do” attitude. And I wonder: which best describes you as we approach the two-year mark of this pandemic? The psalmist says, “*Wait for the Lord*. *Be strong; take heart.*” If we have trouble waiting for this pandemic to end after two years, how can we possibly be any better at waiting for the Lord after two thousand years? The psalmist urges us, God asks of us, Jesus tells us to wait patiently and faithfully, trusting that God is at work in our midst. But can you do that?

Israel got a second chance. After failing their first test, the Israelites seem to have waited for Moses more faithfully the second time around. They watched as the cloud descended upon the top of the mountain, enveloping Moses and the craggy peak. They knew that somewhere in that cloud was the Lord, speaking with Moses like two old friends might speak with one another – or so Moses said. And so they watched and they waited and they hoped that Moses might return with a hope-filled word from the Lord for them. Moses was their connection to the Lord. It was he who had been called to deliver them from Egypt, he who had stood with staff outstretched as God parted the Red Sea, he who had struck the rock at Meribah to produce a stream of water when they thought they might die of thirst, he who had spoken to them the words of the Lord God had spoken to him. Without Moses, the people feared God might give up on them, desert them, and find some other chosen people. And so at the foot of the mountain they waited and wondered when he might come down, if he might come down, and what he might say to them, for it was only through Moses that they heard any word from the Lord.

How do you hear any word from the Lord, if you hear any word at all? We have no Moses to bring us that word, no Jesus to teach us in person. But we do have the words they spoke – along with those of the prophets and the psalmist and a host of other divinely inspired writers who have shared with us what God has to say to us. They are words written long ago and far away but words that we trust may inspire us in our hearing as surely as they inspired those who first spoke them or wrote them. But we only hear them if we listen – whether that listening happens in this sacred space or in the comfort of your home or in the wilds of some wilderness walk or in the midst of some silent moment, for we cannot hear them if we do not listen. God speaks to us through the words of Scripture and hopefully, occasionally, through the words of us flawed preachers, but also through prayers that are our conversations with God, and sometimes God speaks to us directly at an unexpected time in an unexpected place. It is not the same for everyone. As with conversations between old friends, you can only hear what God has to say if you do not do all the talking, but take time to listen as well. God’s parting words to the disciples on the mountain at the Transfiguration were, “Listen to him!” and that is God’s word to us as well: “Listen to him!” which suggests God knows that listening is not something that we or the disciples on that mountaintop do very well.

On Mt. Sinai Moses listened to what God had to say to God’s stiff-necked people, and after forty days and forty nights, down from the mountain he came with another set of tablets in hand, commandments etched in stone to shape the lives of God’s people in their life together. But as the people gathered to hear Moses, it was not the stone tablets that drew their attention; what stunned them, what frightened them, what awed them was that unbeknownst to Moses, his face was aglow – not sunburned, not reflecting light like the top of my head tends to do, but aglow with holy light from his encounter with the Lord. From that point forward Moses’ face glowed with that holy light – glowed so brightly that his face had to be veiled when he wasn’t speaking a word from the Lord, glowed to reflect the glory of the Lord shining in him!

I wonder if that happens to all those who stand face to face with God, to all those who encounter God in a life-changing way on a desert mountaintop or in a mountain valley or a Staunton church or a Virginia home? Do they continue to reflect God’s glory after that experience? In their faces and words and deeds and lives, does the glory of God shine through? Nelson Mandela says:

*We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

*Let your light shine*, says Jesus. For, as we let God’s glory shine in our lives, we inspire others to let that light shine in their lives as well. Does God’s glory shine through you?

In Moses’ shining face the people got a glimpse of the glory of God. So too, those disciples on the mountaintop with Jesus who saw the dazzling brilliance of God’s beloved Son in company with Moses and Elijah got a glimpse of God’s glory, a glimpse of that glorious reality of who Jesus really was, not just an itinerant preacher and healer, not just the carpenter son of Mary, but also the Son of God through whom God’s glory was revealed. Such direct glimpses of the glory of God are rare. Yet the reflections of God’s glory shine all around us. In a beautiful sunset or starlit night, “*the heavens are telling the glory of God*.” In our worship and service, we glorify God with words, songs, and faithful actions. Eric Liddle, the Scottish Olympic runner of *Chariots of Fire* fame, said he ran, not for his own glory, but solely to give glory to God. Our faces may not shine with God’s glory like Moses or Jesus, but our lives can shine with the glory of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, a glory we are called to reflect for all the world to see.

What then do you reflect in your life – the glory of God or something less glorious? Richard Rohr contends that, “*All things give glory to God just by being what they are.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) If he is right, then we reflect God’s glory by being the people God created us to be, the people Christ calls us to be, by believing in him, loving God with all that we are, and loving our neighbors one and all. God does not ask us to be someone else. God asks us to be ourselves. “*When asked why he did not behave with more dignity Zusya of Hanipol replied, ‘When I get to heaven, they won’t ask me, “Zusya, why weren’t you Moses?” They’ll ask me, “Zusya, why weren’t you Zusya?*”’”[[2]](#endnote-2)

We are not called to be Moses or Jesus or Zusya of Hanipol or St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa or anyone else. We are called to be who could God uniquely created us to be; in faithfully being that person, we are to reflect the glory of God for all the world to see. And if we all were to do that, if we all were to reflect God’s glory in our lives and in our life together, then the whole world might be filled with God’s glorious light and we might actually experience peace on earth – something for which we all long, especially in light of the events of this week! But it starts with us, with each of us, one life at a time, one light at a time. So, let your light shine! Or more appropriately, let God’s light, God’s glorious light shine through you. And to God be the glory – in us, through us, from us – this day and all days! Amen

1. Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, Whitaker House: 2016, p.172 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, Fount Press: London, 2000, p.30 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)