

Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Pettit

February 14th, 2021

Exodus 24: 12-18 and Mark 9: 2-9 “The Clamor Down Below”

In the last few weeks, we have followed the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as portrayed in Mark’s gospel. As Jesus returned from the Jordan wilderness and entered Capernaum, he began to address powerfully the forces that affect and inhabit people. He healed, cast out diseases and demons. The people responded to Jesus quickly with enthusiasm and excitement because he was able to help. He taught with authority, and he had authority over all the things that ailed them.

As the realization grows of what Christ can do and what he is calling his disciples to be a part of, the need and hopes and expectations and demands seemed to overwhelm. In our passage last week, Jesus retreats to a quiet place in the early morning hours to retain a sense of sanity and gain through prayer and quiet clarity of calling amid the needs and hopes and pleas for help.

The Needs of the world can be overwhelming, can’t they? Perhaps you feel it when the appeal letters fill your mailbox at the end of the year? You can’t support them all, and you feel the weight of that. The problems of the world can be overwhelming and confusing, can’t they. Because while we believe with the people of Capernaum that the love, forgiveness, grace, and power of Christ makes a difference, the needs can still overwhelm. We want that healing effect in our lives and in the lives of others, but how do we make that happen? How do we experience it ourselves, and how do we convince others that they should seek Jesus too? How does the church situate itself amid this needy world? How do we reach it? How do we serve?

In my sermon title, I’ve used the word clamor to refer to the needs, challenges, and even opportunities, that accost us on a regular basis. Clamor because it is a lot of noise and input and hard to decipher one thing from another. On the one hand, this clamor threatens to disrupt any clarity and holy connection in our lives, full of distraction. And this same clamor is often, at the same time, the stuff we are called to minister to. It is our family. It is our community. It is the broken world of our lives and others’ lives that we are called to enter with hope, with grace, forgiveness, peace, and wholeness. Jesus comes to meet needs, but he also has to step away from meeting those needs at moments. So we try to respond to the needs, to enter the world as Christ calls us to, but the clamor threatens to disorient us or train us to be a type of co-dependent of chaos, and we become absorbed in it and lose perspective.

Our passage this morning comes in a later period of Jesus' ministry. It was a time when the clamor was even greater—the demands, the needs, the controversies, the voices, the concerns. Add to these politics and power struggles. Things would intensify as Jesus returned to Jerusalem and neared the events of Holy Week.

Our gospel reading features Jesus once again coming away from the clamor for a moment of clarity. In this break from the noises and needs that are hard to decipher, he stands in light and communion with the saints from before. Just as he needed that time away earlier on in ministry, he needs that window and connection with God's plans and purposes that might keep him centered, that might direct him in the days to come as it gets harder, maybe even more confusing.

He needs this moment of perspective and intimacy because even while he is away for a moment of quiet, the needs persist, and he will be reminded the moment he comes down. Following the Transfiguration account, as Jesus and the three disciples come down the mountain, they encounter a boy who has a demon. In his account, Matthew uses an expression for the boy's condition; he says the boy is "moonstruck," drawing the contrast between this moment of Jesus shining like the sun on the top of the mountain and coming down to a boy that is moonstruck. Jesus comes down and is immediately confronted with matters dark and difficult. Immediately confronted by the matters of ministry that the mountain gave a momentary reprieve from.

In our Old Testament reading, the clamor and anxiety won't wait for Moses to get down before the people react to the stress in ways guided by anxiety and not by God's voice or leading. They grow impatient and uneasy while Moses meets with the Lord on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. While Moses is on the mountain, the Lord gives him instructions for the Tabernacle and all the significant furnishings for it, and instructions about leaders and the priesthood. And two tablets with 10 words about who they are and who they will be. God is basically scripting out what it is going to look like for God's presence to dwell among them, and how they are going to live in light of this divine-human relationship and with God's ongoing presence. If only the people can hang on a little longer.

So Moses has this moment of clarity, of calm and clear communication with the Lord. But the clamor is building in the background. For while Moses is having these long deliberations with the Lord, the Israelites down at the bottom of the mountain are freaking out. "Moses did not say he would be gone this long!" They get antsy, they want a representation of divine presence, something like what they were used to having in the past, and in their panic want it now, so they press Aaron

to do something. Everyone takes their medals, and jewelry, and they pool it together to form their own divine image, the image of the golden calves. This is what Moses returns to. In that moment of demands and anxiety, the people become the obstacle to God's plans, rather than the conduit of them. But, ironically, they are also the congregation Moses is called to lead and care for. The clamor is both detractor to Moses' ministry and the focus and locus of his ministry.

So, the time on the mountain is a moment of encounter, a holy moment in God's presence, a moment of clarity and empowerment apart from the chaos and confusion, a moment when we get a glimpse that God is with us, a moment when the feelings of distance and confusion dissipate. A moment of confidence that we can lean on for those days when things are not clear, or God's presence is not as keenly seen or felt – to walk in faith knowing, because we have had the privilege of perspective at those select times.

The moment on the mountain is a moment of encounter, but it is also somewhat of a temptation, something of a distraction. It is a holy moment that the disciples want to extend, to make this place a holy site, a place of worship and pilgrimage. But Jesus does not intend this. Rather, the disciples are not to be oriented to *this mountain*, but to the presence of God as expressed through Christ's ministry, which is always *on the move*. They are not to remain on the mountain, but to be oriented as Christ is oriented, to a world of need, to people down below, to God at work amid the clamor.

Richardson catches this sense in her poem that we read.

Believe me, I know
 how tempting it is
 to remain inside this blessing,
 to linger where everything
 is dazzling
 and clear.

But this blessing
 is built for leaving.
 This blessing
 is made for coming down
 the mountain.
 This blessing
 wants to be in motion,
 to travel with you

So the time on the mountain is a moment of encounter, and it is a potential distraction from the ever-moving presence and ministry of Christ. But it is also an interpretive moment. It is a moment where we see through the confusion and get a glimpse of what is going on in light of what has already gone on; when we see the present in light of God's redemptive past. That is part of the point of the gospel writers telling this story. For this moment is more than just being alone with Jesus who is transfigured by the light, for he is joined by Moses and Elijah, and Jesus hears a word from heaven. Jesus is joined by these other pivotal figures who too had their moments of communion with the divine, these other prophetic figures whom God anointed and used in special ways. Jesus stands in the line of those whom God has met with in a special way, with those whom God has called to lead at pivotal moments in God's history with people.

To see where we stand in the big picture. To see how this moment is significant in God's purposes and orient ourselves to those purposes. To see how this moment fits in with what God has been doing in us all along.

In the liturgical rhythms of the Christian year, Transfiguration Sunday always comes just before Lent. It is the moment of light and clarity before we enter Ash Wednesday's somberness. But I'm not sure Lent needs to be seen as dark and somber. It is a season of reflection. Perhaps Lent can be a season, like Transfiguration Sunday, of seeing where we stand in light of God's purposes, in light of the larger story. Perhaps it is a season where we can slow down enough, where we can step away from the clamor long enough to ask, what is God doing in and through us? What might God do in and through us? How might God's healing and wholeness find a way into our hearts, and in our relationships? How might we be present to the clamor of need around us in such a way that we retain some of the perspective of those holy moments apart? How might we be present to the clamor of need around us in such a way that we bring hope, and light, and a level of sanity?

Lent is a time for needed reflection. Because we live in a world of chaos, division, anxiety, deep loneliness. And those needs can be overwhelming even though this is the world we are called to serve and to love. But like Jesus praying on the hillside in the morning hours, like Jesus with the saints before communing on the mountain, we pray for a moment of encounter. And we also pray for a holy residue from that encounter to stay with us as we head down the mountain, following the Spirit who is always on the move.

And all God's people said...

The Transfiguration

(Mt 17:1–8; Lk 9:28–36; 2 Pet 1:16–18)

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

The Coming of Elijah

(Mt 17:9–13)

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Dazzling *A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday* by Jan Richardson

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.

We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.

But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.

It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.

It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray

until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.

¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.