

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

March 6, 2011

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Worship Theme: A Touch of Wonder,

Exodus 24:12–18, 2 Peter 1:16–21, Matthew 17:1–9

Each of us is on a faith journey led by God, and it is always with a touch of wonder that I hear of these journeys of faith as told in our new member classes. Some people have always had faith in God in Jesus Christ; others have had dramatic experiences of joy or tragedy that led them to faith or challenged their faith; a few have found that the Spirit has just slipped the faith into their lives and others are still wrestling with what they believe. Each faith journey is unique and the wonder of it all that touches me strengthens my faith in God in Jesus Christ.

And so it is that today's scripture passages are faith journeys filled with more than just a touch of wonder. What is exciting about them is that we are invited to be part of the journey. So let us join Moses and the Hebrews on Mt. Sinai in the far eastern desert of today's Egypt as they journeyed toward the Promised Land 3260 years ago.

Yahweh, as the Hebrews called God, had just made a covenant with Moses and the people saying he would be their God; they would be his people; and God would lead them into the Promised Land. In response to this great gift, this touch of wonder, Moses and the people bowed down in thanksgiving to worship God. In doing this, those ancient people of faith set the example we still follow today when we worship. We come in thanksgiving to worship the God of the Hebrews who has made the same covenant with us and has given us the abundance of life we enjoy. We also look for a touch of wonder when we come to worship. Yet, the touch of wonder then was about to become an explosion of wonder when Yahweh 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." Moses entered the cloud that covered the mountain and "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."

"And 'Moses entered the cloud.' What a statement! He goes where no one has ever gone. He leaves the zone of humanness and enters the very sphere of God. And there he stays, forty days and forty nights, meaning a very long time. No one, not his brother Aaron nor the Hebrews knows whether he will ever come out again." What was going on in there? It sounds both wondrous and awesome to be in the presence of God. [TNIBC Vol. I, pg. 882](#)

I have had a sense of this wonder and awe in several places in my travels. One place I experienced this wonder and awe has been in the clouds near the top of Harney Peak in Custer State Park in South Dakota. In the thick mist, one closely follows a trail that winds through a pine forest and very strangely shaped granite boulders. Then, suddenly, one is at the top of the mountain, a glorious place the Lakota people call the center of the universe where God speaks to them. Another place in the Black Hills where one can experience this wonder and awe of God is on

the side of the same mountain in the Cathedral Spires that look like they are the throne of God. In that place, one stands in silence expecting God to speak through the winds that swirl around the spires. One more setting was on the Zugspitze, the highest mountain in Germany at 9720 feet above sea level. As one is terrifyingly lifted 7,700 feet up the mountain side by cable car from the valley floor, the swift moving clouds enclose you like a continuously moving ribbon. The anticipation of the top is great and the actual sight of it is very rewarding with more fast moving clouds, and a grand view of Austria. Unfortunately, the mystical presence of God experience is subdued by the restaurant located there that sells great brats, sauerkraut and German potato salad. I suspect each of you has had some wonder and awe filled misty cloud experience like these in your lives. Moses surely experienced wonder as he entered such a cloud.

As it was for Moses, so it is for us. We must enter the place of God's presence for us to meet God. This experience in the cloud on Mt. Sinai set the standard for worship for the Jews and then the Christians. In each worship service we are called to come before the presence of God, whether it be in a stunningly beautiful sanctuary like this whose stained glass windows and empty brass cross are designed to give us a sense of being before God, or in the simplicity of a wooden Skyline Camp worship center in the woods. We may not experience mystical clouds on a mountain in these places, but we come to be touched by what the mysterious and wondrous God has to tell us and show us as we enter his presence and worship him.

Moses was indeed touched by the presence of God when he entered the cloud on that mountain, where the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire in the sight of the people of Israel." In that cloud, Moses was transformed by God into the law giver of God to his people. Even his appearance was transfigured into one who spent time in the presence of God. The narrator of Exodus does not tell us all of what it was like to be in the actual presence of God. Yet, the narrator leaves us with a touch of wonder, a sense of mystery and curiosity. May it develop into an overwhelming desire to come face to face with God at least in spirit, if not in a physical sense, so that our lives, our very appearance is transformed and we are made Holy; called to be leaders and spokespersons for God and God's covenant like Moses was.

This theophany, this experience of God by Moses also set the scene for the transfiguration of Jesus we heard read from the Gospel of Matthew. Again, a mountain top, clouds and a touch of wonder are involved. "Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." This is what happened to Moses. It was physical evidence of the very presence of God. As we heard read in II Peter, this was a great moment of wonder and awe for those disciples. The closest I have been to such a physical change was a member of the church I served in Rapid City, SD. She was a cranky old lady who no one liked, and she had had a stroke that brought her to the edge of death. By a miracle of God she recovered and was a totally different person. She smiled a lot and her face and personality shone with the love of God. At first, we were not sure how to respond to this woman made new. It was a touch of wonder and awe to us. So, I suspect the disciples present with Jesus were touched by the same kind of wonder and awe.

But the transfiguration of Jesus was not yet complete for, “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.” Moses was the great law giver and Elijah one of the greatest prophets. Both had been taken to heaven upon their deaths and the vision of their return gave credence to the promise of the resurrection and the return of Jesus. It was God’s way of saying Jesus was at least as great a law giver and prophet as those two heroes of the faith.

Yet the wonder and awe were still not finished for God caused a cloud to come around them and announced, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” In this mystic moment, this touch of wonder, God declared Jesus to be greater than Moses and Elijah and that Jesus was the Messiah the Jews had awaited for centuries. In truth God was declaring; “This is my Son, my very heart and soul, listen to what he teaches you, watch how he lives for in him you will find me, and you will find salvation. Because of him, there is no longer the need of a cloud hiding my presence from you. In my son, I have come to you at the human level in the open to touch you often with wonder and awe.”

Of course the disciples were afraid of all they heard and saw and fell to their knees. Jesus, speaking for God told them what he often told them, “Rise up, and do not be afraid.” Yes, as majestic, mysterious, wondrous and incomprehensible our experiences with God are, we are never to fear, but are to approach God as Moses did in the thundering cloud on the mountain in complete trust. We are to hear the words of assurance Jesus expressed to the disciples, “Rise up and do not be afraid.” You see, the God who often touches us with wonder, whether it be in the stormy clouds when the sun shines through like a beam from heaven, on a misty mountain top where the clouds suddenly break, in the miracle of the recovery from illness, during worship in a sanctuary or in our hearts during our journey in faith is not the God of fear, but of an overpowering love, and grace. Out of love, he gives his law to guide us to live according to his covenant where he will always be our God, and we will always be his people. Let us listen to God’s Son, Jesus as he tells us, “Rise up and do not be afraid.”

Jesus had another reason to tell his disciples, “Rise up and do not be afraid.” For this transfiguration touch of wonder experience was the beginning of Jesus’ final physical and faith journey into Jerusalem: Where he offered up the first Lord’s Supper in preparation to the giving up of his body and the shedding of his blood on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins: Where he made the new covenant with us to be with us forever and forgive our sins: And where his transfiguration was completed in God’s raising him from the dead. It is the same transfiguration of our lives that he promises us as we place our faith in him. As we journey in our faith with him by our side to lead us to the Promised Land and an everlasting touch of wonder, there is every reason for us to rise up and absolutely no reason to be afraid.