

“The Flash and the Photo”
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
2 Peter 1:16-19
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, February 23, 2020

Some things in life are hard to hold on to - and end up getting away from us before we are ready. / Things like a butterfly that lights too briefly on our window sill. Or the sunshine on a beautiful spring day.

And while some things like that are meant to be free. . .

. . . There are other things that get away because they slip through our fingers. Things we should have held on to. / Like our car keys. / Or a good friendship.

And life can be a bit of a struggle between the two.

Between beautiful experiences allowed to be free - -

- - and important insights to retain and keep.

There are things - that we want to hold on to - but that are blinding and brief.

A flash on a camera - for example - is blinding and brief. It leaves us with only spots in front of our eyes. / It produces a picture we can hold on to. / But sometimes even then - it is difficult to capture exactly what we want in a photo.

Does anyone remember the flood of 1996? / It was an amazing occurrence. Buildings that we normally walk by were under water. / And I wanted to take a picture. But it was difficult to capture exactly what I wanted to - - in a picture.

Have you ever struggled in a passport photo booth? / You enter the booth and deposit the coins. / You don't know exactly how the thing operates. / It IMMEDIATELY starts taking pictures. / You are still standing up getting situated. But the camera is at face level ONLY if you are sitting down.

In one of these photo booths you get FOUR shots. / ONE of your lap - - one of your chest - - hopefully at least one of your face.

In my experience you are not always ready for the flash.

And you didn't always get a picture you want to hold on to.

So NOW think about - - the disciples, and the Israelites in this morning's scripture readings. / There is this great flash, and they have a hard time responding to it.

Moses goes up the mountain. Mt. Sinai. And God descends around him - the Glory of the Lord - like a devouring fire. / A great flash of light. / And on that mountain Moses receives the ten commandments. / They are like the 'snap shot' photo of this Holy Experience.

The souvenir. / Something to take back DOWN the mountain.

But in the same way that vacation photos sometimes don't convey the excitement of the actual trip - - to those you take them back to . . .

. . . the Israelites respond with about as much excitement as we often show for a showing of our cousin's 200 vacation photos after supper on their lap top.

THEY have NOT had this mountain top encounter with God. / And they are clearly not doing anything like obeying God's commandments by worshipping a GOLDEN CALF.

So Moses breaks the tablets. / And heads back up the mountain again.

Moses is having these incredible encounters with God - - on the mountain - - and is trying to communicate what they mean for LIFE - - and for the lives of the Israelites - - but without the experience of God that Moses had - the people seem unconcerned.

They are unconcerned about the commandments.

And they are afraid and confused by his experience of God.

And they don't seem to want to pay much attention to Moses - who is desperately trying to communicate his very significant experience of God to them.

The disciples, Peter, James, and John, in this morning's reading from Matthew don't seem much more prepared to understand a direct encounter with God than the Israelites.

They flounder too.

Just as I floundered in front of the flash of that photo booth.

In the gospel, Jesus' face glows. Just as Moses' face had glowed. And the disciples are afraid. / And they fall on their faces in awe. /

Jesus has just taken them up a mountain. / God has descended on the mountain. And while the disciples look on, Jesus glows with light - - and God speaks.

"This is my Son, listen to him"

At this point I have to admit - - this is one of the most fantastic and strange parts of the gospel - - and I think we all struggle with it.

And so - when Peter says that he wants to build BOOTHS - - buildings - - to HOLD this vision there - - I have to say - - OK sure why not?

Peter has encountered God.

And he wants to hold on to the experience.

Sometimes faith is mysterious, and powerful, and strange.

So - - let's figure out as much as we can - about these passages from scripture.

We might begin by comparing the two.

They are SO similar. / They both begin with a reference to six days. / They both are mountaintop experiences. / Moses is there in BOTH of them - - the second as a ghost or apparition of some kind...

So - - what are these texts saying??

In the Old Testament, the mountain top experience gives us the law - which is not followed very well. / In the New Testament - - the mountain top experience - - - points us to - - JESUS. / As if Jesus has taken the place of the law.

And yet - listen to what Jesus says: "your sins are forgiven, judge not lest you be judged, take up your cross and follow me, the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom of God before you"

He's not as much of law enforcer as we might expect. / More of a law breaker.

Or a law - - changer.

Or maybe it's a different kind of enforcement.

Jesus is not so much a person who gave us a list of laws - - as he was someone who died. / Who died for us. / And to whom we then respond - - out of LOVE.

And when you experience that kind of LOVE - the love of Christ - it is like a FLASH! / After love like that - laws don't have to be enforced - they will be lived.

FLASH.

I once saw a series of interviews with kids about - - whether or not they would follow rules. / First the interviewers asked parents if their kids would choose right instead of wrong. / The parents said yes. / This is what they had taught them.

But as the parents watched on a TV screen in another room - - those kids said they would do all kinds of wrong. / It was a bit shocking.

Why not cheat and steal? All the adults they knew did.

Without a PERSON who embodied the law - they had no compelling reason to follow the law.

As Christians - we have MORE than a person who embodies the law.

In Christ - we have someone who transcends any law - by first LOVING us - and then DYING - - in spite of all the laws we break.

It's difficult to capture that in a photo.

Or in an ancient Biblical text.

But it IS the experience - - the FLASH - - that gave birth to these texts.

As we think about how we might LIVE - - in response to God's amazing love - - and how we might let our experiences of REAL FAITH give us PRESPECTIVE - - consider some words from some writings on spirituality called, "Above the Treeline" by Heije Faber.

Has anyone ever been up to the top of Mt. Hood?

Timberline lodge is named after its location: it is on the treeline.

The timberline.

Above which no trees will grow...

So think about that, and about these TWO texts today from the Bible - - which take place - - on mountain tops. / And listen...

"We have emerged from the wood - - above the treeline. / There life takes on new perspectives. / The summit of the mountain again comes into view...

Though it is still a long way away - - the summit is AGAIN in view.

The terrain over which we have to go becomes gradually rougher.

It is cold on the mountain slope - - and the fierce sun is shining.

Far down below - - every now and then we can see the village. / The paths that we have to tread are not always clearly visible. Others have gone before us on these paths, and here and there we see indications of how they went and in which direction they point us.

We are reminded of stories from the Bible.

Our journey above the treeline is like an exodus.

Above the treeline we get into a harsher climate. / It is colder here. Sometimes there is mist and sometimes there are storms. / Certainly there is a good deal of sun, and there are wide views above the treeline.

But we are unprotected here - - the path is difficult.

We have to climb!

It leads us past all kinds of crevasses. / There are no longer any houses where we can live safely - - we have to live - - in TENTS.

Life above the treeline is often also dangerous. / We have to rope up - - to tie ourselves to one another in order to get further - - life here can only be experienced as teamwork. / The individual cannot do anything without the help of others.

To travel alone is dangerous - - and the team will need a guide.

A guide who knows the way.

Getting above the treeline means that we begin to see humanity in perspective.”

So writes Rev. Faber.

He makes me wonder how WE can begin to see humanity in perspective.

What would it mean for our lives - - to find some new perspective on the world around us - - and on our lives? / As we sit in our TENTS - - on the mountain top - - far away from our houses or villages - - what do we learn?

Is there a better way to live?

Is there a better way for our life - - in these houses and villages?

Maybe we can never totally capture our best insights in a photo.

But we CAN at least remember that there WAS a flash.

By which I mean - - an experience.

Some moment of real love.

Some instant of insight.

Some glimmer of truth.

Amen