

In the Presence of God

Matthew 17:1-9

INTRODUCTION

Monica Parker was the daughter of a Jewish mother and a father who was a member of Church of England. As such, religion was seldom mentioned in her house as she grew up. She writes:

I used to see children holding the hands of their parents going into various houses of worship and I had this envy. I don't know that I was missing religion, because we didn't have any conversations about it, but what I was missing was a sense of community and a sense of place... (Monica Parker)

That lack of a childhood faith life motivated her to write a book about what children think about God. Hearing their responses, she said, was like "opening up wonderful little treasure boxes and seeing what comes out of them."

Parker started asking children on her street in Toronto, Ontario, and then expanded to her wider network, and eventually traveled from the United Kingdom to Germany to the United States to make sure she had children representing every economic, cultural and religious background. Their responses to questions including "Who is God?" "What does God wear?" and "What is God's job?" range from the hilarious to the touching and deeply poignant.

Here are a few of the answers she received:

- "God doesn't have a house of His own. He doesn't need one except on Sundays 'cause that's the day he likes to rest." (Ethan, age 8)
- "I talk to God when I need help with things but not my homework, because my mom says I have to do that by myself." (Jackson, age 7)
- "My mom talks to God whenever we need more money." (Manny, age 6)
- "My father never believed God was real but my mom did. But then she got sick and now he prays to God every day but my mom doesn't pray anymore." (Max, age 8)

How would you describe God? If you were approached on the streets of Springfield by an author-to-be, and asked to describe God, how would you respond?

All three of our Scripture readings today prompted my thinking in this direction. Let me show you what I mean. In the Old Testament reading:

To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. (Exodus 24:17)

Not surprising. Earlier in this chapter God had given strict orders that only Moses was allowed to climb the mountain to be in the presence of God:

Moses alone is to approach the Lord; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him. (Exodus 24:2)

Hence, for the people of Moses' day, God was a mysterious, scary, unapproachable God. He stayed in the distance and made sure you stayed away. In fact, you faced the death penalty if you got too close:

Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. (Exodus 19:12)

In the Gospel reading, when the voice of God booms from the heavens to say:

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him! (Matthew 17:5)

We read:

When the disciples (Peter, James and John) heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. (Matthew 17:6)

A distant, threatening God. A God Who is unapproachable. Someone to be frightened of. Does that describe the God you know? It still does for many people.

- I know a person who firmly believes that God doesn't care about her because she watches God answer the prayers of other people, yet He never answers hers.
- A whole segment of our society views God as behind the time, old-fashioned, out of date and out of step with current society. An old man with divine dementia.

But as Christians we might use other descriptors, right? We might say:

- God is love.
- God is a constant source of strength and help.
- He gives courage when you are afraid, and so on.
- He's my friend.

By the time Peter wrote the epistle lesson we read earlier in the service today, he has transitioned from falling to the ground at the sound of God's voice to speaking of God in highly relational terms. He is not afraid of God anymore.

- What made the difference for Peter?
- And what makes it possible for people like you and me to move from seeing God as scary and vindictive to seeing Him as loving and caring?

Let me share two insights:

INSIGHT #1: WE NEED TO WAIT FOR HIM

In the Exodus story, God made Moses wait for six days. The text says:

For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. (Exodus 24:16)

In our Tuesday morning Bible study we tried to figure out what Moses did during those six days of waiting. He didn't have an iPhone, so playing solitaire was out. No ESPN basketball games. No CNN or Fox News. All he could was ... wait.

The same thing happened when Jesus, Peter, James and John went up on the mountain.

After six days... he was transfigured before them. (Matthew 17:1-2)

There are two waiting times in a normal worship service for us.

- The first happens during confession, when I ask you to kneel or be seated for silent reflection and self-examination.
- The second happens during the Prayer of the Church when I pause so that you can pray silently about the praises and petitions you have.

Do you ever wonder if I've fallen asleep up here? "C'mon Pastor! That's long enough!" Those pauses are only about 10-15 seconds in length. Can you imagine six days of that?

But if you wait before the Lord for six days ... six minutes ... six years ... you begin to see God in a different way.

- You begin to see that He does everything on His timetable, not yours.
- You also see that God is the only one who can do anything about your situation.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us:

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! (Isaiah 30:18)

INSIGHT #2: WE NEED LISTEN TO HIM

That's the instruction God gave to those three disciples while they watched Moses, Elijah and Jesus have a staff meeting there on the mountain.

This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!
(Matthew 17:5)

Peter was so busy talking that he couldn't listen.

Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (Matthew 17:4)

He had just offered to make camp when God said “Just be quiet and listen.”

One scholar observed that in his experience – and in mine as well:

The people who object to the God of the Scripture have never listened to what He has said and done in the Scriptures.

The more time you spend reading your Bible and engaged in meaningful spiritual conversations around the Bible the more relational God becomes, the less frightening He becomes. In His Word You hear His voice. And that voice that once sounded frightening becomes a voice that brings comfort.

During His early teachings Jesus made seven I AM statements. Those will be the basis for seven of the 14 sermons I will preach during Lent. In one of them Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd and that He takes care of His sheep with the loving compassion of a good shepherd. And part of that relationship is related to God's voice:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (John 10:27)

APPLICATION

Put those two insights together and you have what Henry Blackaby calls “an experience with God.” (You might remember our Sunday School class at the beginning of last year.)

That experience is why Peter can write what he does in the 2 Peter text. Remember, the human author of 2 Peter is the same Peter that spoke rashly on the mountain and fell down in fear at the voice of God. About 30 years later this same Peter wrote:

We did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (2 Peter 1:16, 18)

In other words, “Let me tell what happened to me.”

As I listened to Jesus and as I waited patiently for the arrival of the Holy Spirit come on the day of Pentecost, I came to understand that our God was not someone to be feared.

- He is awesome, yes!
- He is awe-inspiring, yes!

But as I reflect on what I saw firsthand on the mountain that day, I came to see a God who loved me so much that He willingly sacrificed His Son on a cross so that I could be forgiven of all my sins and so that I could become what He designed me to be.

One of my goals for each of us as we enter into the Lenten season this week is that our own experience of God will be heightened. Lent provides you with an invitation to add quiet time to your life so that you can simply wait on the Lord. It also encourages you to spend extra time in God's Word so that you can hear His voice. Our theme is "Behold the Lamb," a theme based on John 1:29:

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

I look forward to the journey with you.

Amen.