

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
March 2, 2014

Matthew 17:1-9
Exodus 24:12-18
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, how many of you have grandmas and grandpas who live far away from Aitkin? If they live far away, you probably don't get to see them very often do you? Do you think those distant grandparents love you? How can you tell if they love you if you hardly ever get to see them?

Maybe they call sometimes. Maybe they use Skype to visit you over the computer. Maybe they send cards. Maybe they give you gifts. When they do get to visit, do they ever give you hugs? Do they ever tell you that they love you? Can you see by the twinkle in their eye and the smile on their face that they love you lots?

Kids, a long, long time ago, people felt like God lived a long ways away from them. Only just a few people ever got to talk to God and they were often afraid of God because they didn't know God very well. Where do we say that God lives? In heaven? What about Jesus? As Christians we believe in one God who comes to visit us in three different persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the old days, long, long ago, people pretty much were afraid of God. That's why God came as Jesus to visit us. God had to show us, in the flesh, in person, just how much God loves and cares about us. Jesus/God loves us enough even to die on the cross for us. And after Jesus/God rose from the dead, God came to live with us, in our hearts, forever. That part of God is the Holy Spirit, just like the dove on our church window up above the altar.

How do we know that God loves us? God died for us. God made us. God takes care of us every day. God gave us our parents, grandparents and family. Jesus came to live in our world. The Holy Spirit of God lives in our hearts. And God uses lots of people to give us hugs. God says I love you whenever someone gets baptized or we have Holy Communion.

Are you afraid of God? Does God love you? Do you love God? Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

We can't handle the **God of the mountain**. According to the **Old Testament**, God slaughtered hundreds of first born Egyptian boys in order to free God's people Israel. This is the same God that slaughtered hundreds of God's own people who, when Moses spent too long talking to God, worshiped false gods at the foot of Mt. Sinai. This is the God who, if seen would literally consume the viewer because God was so holy and humans so sinful. This is the God who caused the destruction of whole nations in order to give God's people a promised land...

Martin Luther often talked about the "**Hidden God**" vs. the "**Revealed God**." Luther argued that the God of the Old Testament, often found shrouded in clouds and high atop some mountain, was too awesome or overwhelming for us to even consider. Luther believed that it was beyond us to try to understand some of the actions that are attributed to God in the Old Testament.

In our Old Testament lesson for today, we get a glimpse of the **God of the mountain**. In seven short verses, we hear about God on the **mountain** 7 times. We hear mention of God **shrouded by clouds** 4 times. And we twice hear reference to "**the glory of the Lord**" appearing like a "**devouring fire**" on the mountain overlooking the people of Israel. God spoke with Moses for **40 days** on this mountain. When the people failed to trust God, those not immediately destroyed by God were forced to wander in the wilderness for **40 years** before being allowed to enter the beloved Promised Land. For the Israelites, the number 40 is very significant and is meant to show **this is a long, long time**. Little wonder that the people feared God...

In our **Gospel** text for today, we once again get a **vision of the God of the mountain and of the clouds**. Jesus has brought three of his followers up onto a high mountain. Once there, two ancient prophets, long since dead and gone, appeared to Jesus and the disciples. Somehow the disciples knew who these prophets were, and true to the festivals of the Jews, Peter offered to build three little shelters for Jesus and the prophets to rest in. That's when almighty God again showed up and spoke from a cloud, "**This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!**"

We can't handle the God of the mountain. **"When the disciples heard this voice, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear."** Mere mortals cannot survive in the presence of this God of the mountain. People have been fearful of this God since the Garden of Eden. I am convinced that God, all through the Old Testament period, **was faithfully moving to give God's people and all people life and blessing. But God's own people couldn't figure it out,** couldn't trust God to love and care for them, and so they again and again felt themselves to be falling under divine judgment and destruction. I can't believe that's what God was doing, but that's certainly what the people believed was happening.

So our disciple friends heard the voice of God and instantly were quivering bowls of jelly on the ground. **"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'**" While they feared God's judgment from the clouds, Jesus/God touched them on the shoulder, calmed their fears and brought them back to their feet. The God who had for so long been distant, shrouded from human eyes, mysterious and frightful had finally come in human form, taking on human flesh, and was standing right there next to them. The God of the mountains spoke and said, **"Jesus is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."** The God who, over the centuries, had only come close to isolated individuals was now coming close to every living person.

Jesus is God almighty, God of the mountains and clouds revealed to us in the flesh, as a person, one of us. Luther argued, **"Don't focus on the Hidden God of the Old Testament. Focus on the Revealed God, Jesus of the New Testament!"** Focus on **Immanuel, God with us**. Focus on the **Word become Flesh**. Focus on the **Babe in the manger**. Focus on the **bleeding, gasping Jesus** hung on the cross.

Jesus is God. God didn't just send his Son, poor Jesus, to die on the cross. Jesus is God who came and died on the cross for us. But there on that ancient mountain top, three early followers of Jesus saw him in a **glorified form** and heard him **glorified by God Almighty**. Jesus touched them. **"Get up and do not be afraid."** Then they no more than looked up and the prophets and cloud and voice were all gone. Only Jesus remained with them. **"As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'"** Jesus didn't want his followers or the world to focus upon the **glory of God** – too overwhelming for them to comprehend.

Jesus wanted them to focus upon the **God who took on flesh** and became human like them.

- Look at the **tender brother** God who said, "**Let the little children come unto me and forbid them not for of such is the kingdom of God.**"
- Look at the **generous provider** God who fed thousands of hungry people with a few small fish and a few loaves of bread.
- Look at the **compassionate healer** God who cured the blind, deaf, lame...
- Look at the **merciful judge** God who said, "**Whoever is without sin cast the first stone.**"
- Look at the **accepting** God who ate with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes.
- Look at the **faithful caregiver** God who said, "**Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.**"
- Look at the **amazing Savior** God who brought Lazarus back from the dead and told the thief on the cross, "**This day you will be with me in paradise.**"

Jesus said, "**Don't tell anyone about this glorious vision until they know that I have literally laid down my life for them.**"

Jesus leaves this glorious mountain top moment in order to go back down into the valley of the shadow of death for us. By nature we are fearful of God. Again and again I hear people, when something goes haywire in their lives, say "**Why is God punishing me?**" They must be looking at the **Hidden God** – judgment, destruction... They need to look at the **Revealed God** – who loves us to **God's own death** and beyond.

We need to see the **Jesus of the valley** if we are to truly see and know the **will of God**. We need to see the **Jesus of the cross** if we are to truly see and know the **heart of God**. We can't handle/understand the God of the mountain. But, we can love and embrace the God of the manger and cross. And even if we can't love and embrace God right now, today, Jesus/God is already loving and embracing us with compassion, mercy, tenderness, generosity and care.

When I look at the God of the **mountains and clouds**, of the **thunderstorm and rainbow**, of the **sun and galaxies**, I am often

breathless with awe. I could easily be overwhelmed and become fearful of how big and powerful God is. The people of the Old Testament certainly were. They didn't dare come close to God... They didn't want to let God come close to them...

When I look at the God of the manger, of the fishing boat, of the market place... When I look at the God who brought me into this world, adopted me in baptism, feeds me again and again at the Lord's Table, and dwells within my very heart... When I hear, "**For God so loved the World that he gave his only Son...**" I have no need to fear. I can let God come close to me. I can come close to God.

When Jesus and our ancient friends got to the bottom of that mountain of glory, the first thing that Jesus did was to help a little boy who needed healing. Jesus still does that. Today I am that little one. Today you are that little one. After Jesus healed that ancient, little boy, he headed for another mountain, one with a cross on it. Then later, when he climbed out of that ancient grave, he came back to the folks and said, "**Do you understand? I really am God. And I did all of this so that you could see clearly, once and for all, how much I love you... Now then, won't you love me back?**"

See how much God loves you? I don't understand that Hidden God. So much of that stuff doesn't make sense to me. But I understand the God who came back from the grave and said, "**You're mine and I love you this much.**" I love the God who now walks closely by my side every day...

When baptismal waters splash across our brow, when we take the Body of Christ into our very hands, when we taste the grace of God - it is then again when Jesus touches us and says, "**Get up and do not be afraid.**" And I need and welcome that touch from loving God every day.

The God of the mountain, I just don't understand... **The God of the cross, that God loves me more than I could ever imagine...** And so I can love God too. I can love God too... You can love God too... Thanks be to God. Amen.