



## Getting Real

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany ~ February 23, 2020*

### Exodus 24:12-18

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the Law and the commandments, which I have inscribed on stone tablets, for you to teach them with.” So Moses and Joshua, his attendant, went up the mountain of God, saying to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return. Aaron and Hur will be with you; if there is dispute among you, turn to them.” Then Moses went up the mountain to where the clouds engulfed it. The glory of YHWH then came to dwell on Mount Sinai. The cloud covered the mountain for six days; on the seventh day, God called to Moses out of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of YHWH looked like an all-consuming fire at the top of the mountain. Moses climbed the mountain until he disappeared into the cloud, and stayed there for forty days and forty nights.

### Psalm 99

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| 1 God reigns; let the people tremble; *<br>God is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake.                              | 6 Moses and Aaron among your priests,<br>and Samuel among those who call upon your Name, *<br>they called upon you, and you answered them. |
| 2 God is great in Zion *<br>and is high above all peoples.   | 7 You spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud; *<br>they kept your testimonies<br>and the decree that you gave them.                      |
| 3 Let them confess God's Name,<br>which is great and awesome; *<br>God is the Holy One.  | 8 “O Holy God, you answered them indeed; *<br>you were a God who forgave them,<br>yet punished them for their evil deeds.”                 |
| 4 “O mighty Ruler, lover of justice,<br>you have established equity; *<br>you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” | 9 Proclaim the greatness of our God<br>and worship on God's holy hill, *<br>for our God is the Holy One.                                   |
| 5 We proclaim your greatness, O God,<br>and fall down before your footstool; *<br>you are the Holy One.                          |  |

### 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not cleverly devise fables when we taught you of the power and coming of our Savior Jesus Christ; we ourselves saw the majesty of our Savior. For Jesus was honored and glorified by our Creator God when the voice of the Majestic Glory spoke out, “This is my Own, whom I love, and with whom I am well pleased.” We heard this ourselves—this voice from heaven—when we were with Jesus on the holy mountain. Moreover, we have the prophetic word, which is even more certain. Depend on it for your own good as a light shining in the dark, until first light breaks and the morning star rises in your hearts. At the same time, you need to know that no prophecy of scripture ever occurred by one's own interpretation. Prophecy never comes through an act of human will, but comes as people have spoken for God under the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a high mountain to be alone with them. And before their eyes, Jesus was transfigured—his face becoming as dazzling as the sun and his clothes as radiant as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said, “Rabbi, how good that we are here! With your permission I will erect three shelters here—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!” Peter was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the cloud came a voice which said, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests. Listen to him!” When they heard this, the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came toward them and touched them, saying, “Get up! Don't be afraid.” When they looked up, they did not see anyone but Jesus. As they were coming down the mountainside, Jesus commanded them, “Don't tell anyone about this until the Chosen One has risen from the dead.”

A few years ago, a one-woman show premiered on Broadway and later on film. Broadway and on film. “The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe” was performed by Lilly Tomlin and written by her life-partner, Jane Wagner. Tomlin plays a number of characters, including “Trudy” a “bag lady,” who though somewhat *touched in the head* (as the saying goes) also is the voice of wisdom throughout the show. Trudy utters one of the greatest philosophical questions/propositions of all time: *What is reality but a collective hunch?* Trudy goes on to say: *I gave up reality a long time ago, and my days have all been jam-packed and fun-filled.*

I have to admit, I feel a growing appeal to find a way to leave reality behind. I’m not talking about anything dramatic, such as taking up hallucinogens or moving to a desert island somewhere. Though I will admit, the recurring fantasy of moving to Canada or maybe even the south of France popped into my head again a couple of days ago. But running away is rarely a useful solution. Still, I bet there are many of us who might feel a little bit worn out by too much reality. We are being bombarded by a seemingly new reality in which “facts” are distorted or ignored, what is *real is presented as fake and vice-versa*, and our various forms of media seem to present us with at least one catastrophic event on a daily basis. And it just seems to keep on coming! *Keep your seatbelts fastened folks, it’s going to be a bumpy ride.* Who might have imagined just a few years ago that we would be facing the reality of our current political divides in this country? And along with the confrontation of certain realities, I’ve detected a growing sense of dread. Increasingly I hear from parents and grandparents about their sense of remorse, fear and anger about the world they are leaving to their children. Many of us are dreading the next election.

It is, in fact, extremely hard to take in the full scope of reality as it imposes itself upon us. It is easier to live in our bubble and keep busy as the time passes. I recently suggested to someone in spiritual direction that she might consider a practice of daily contemplation as a Lenten discipline. As someone with a long commitment to ministry in the city but now retired, I suggested that she might take some time each day to stop and consider some aspect of urban life that we often don’t see or try to see, whether that be someone on the street, sleeping in a Septa station, or otherwise living in extreme poverty. But such a contemplation would not only help to make real the true extent of suffering in the world, but would also reveal many instances of grace: incidents of deep kindness, heroic resilience and persistent hope. This exercise came to mind in light of an organization I am apart of which provides *pro-bono* psychotherapy to those in or beyond foster care. If you want a heavy dose of “the real,” talk to someone who grew up in the foster care system in the city of Philadelphia! Indeed, there are many tales of woe. But there are also tales of courage and persistence which teach us a bit more of what it means to live with adversity.

There is a special grace in being able to live within the paradox of great sorrow and great joy; to hold both the awful and the awesome. We can become fixated on the bad news, but in the next moment have our breath taken away by an experience of sublime beauty or even a small act of human kindness.

Still, we can become weary. I’m sure that Peter, James and John were somewhat worn out after traipsing around the countryside with Jesus for some time. They must have looked forward to going up the mountain for a bit of respite. Of course, it didn’t turn out to be any kind of picnic. Instead, it was an experience that knocked them to the ground. Far from seeming real, it much of seemed surreal to see their companion transformed into a figure of dazzling light and then be joined by two of the greatest luminaries from the Hebrew tradition. Then, to top it all off, a voice from the clouds pronounces Jesus as God’s own, the beloved, and commands the awe-struck humans to “listen to him.” Then comes the kicker, as they stumble back down the mountain, when Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about what happened. (Obviously, someone told, or we wouldn’t have the story we have.)

Folks have long debated what is going on in this scene. It is, by far the most dramatic—short of the actual resurrection—of the many epiphanies of the Christ, in which something is revealed about Jesus which goes beyond ordinary perception. Some think this might have been akin to a shared hallucination of the disciples. Theologically, the symbolism of the event is not subtle. Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, which is a pretty good way to establish his *bona fides*, not to mention the additional endorsement of the voice from the clouds. Still more interesting and controversial is the instruction what the disciples should keep this experience secret until “the chosen one had risen from the dead.” You would think that this would provide great publicity to strengthen recognition of the itinerant preacher, and maybe even prevent the tragedy of his death on a cross. But I think that Matthew, at least, is making a point. The full reality of who Jesus is cannot be grasped outside of the full sweep of events from the incarnation through the resurrection. After all, it is really the death and resurrection of Jesus which fully reveals his nature as the “Christ of God.”

We might each take it upon ourselves to determine the reality of this scene, though we should pay attention to the

truth of it. Whatever we make of Jesus, we need to come to terms is that the reality of Jesus is always more than we can grasp within our relatively narrow category of the *real*. And this might lead us toward a greater capacity to engage the reality of the world and our lives. When Jesus comes down from the mountain and continues to walk toward Jerusalem, he does what he has always done: loves courageously and fiercely. And we are asked to do the same. We are called on to inhabit a love requiring not only courage but imagination. We need to be able to see the “other” through the eyes of God. To see the opportunity to engage when we might want to escape reality. To find God in all things.

Mountains may be obstacles. They may be foreboding and dangerous. But they are also often depicted as holy places—the thin places between heaven and earth. The challenge is less about moving mountains or even crossing them. It’s what happens when we come down from the mountain, particularly after having been knocked over for one reason or another. Jesus and his companions went back to the ordinary and challenging world to go about their business. But the “ordinary” would henceforth always be framed by the extraordinary experience of having been close to the divine holiness. In fact, to quote Gerard Manly Hopkins, *The world is charged with the grandeur of God...* God continues to transfigure the world and transfigure us, if we can only sustain our attention toward this reality. May we feel energized by the real opportunities for right action which are continually offered to us, and transformed through the acts of courageous love which we are invited to experience and enact.

Quoting Hopkins again

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.