

Where We Find God

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

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Scenes like these in our biblical texts today are what we think of when we think about finding God, meeting the Lord face-to-face. The first text translates us to the Mountain of the Lord, shrouded in clouds and mists and mystery, where Moses speaks with God. The second passage brings us up onto The Mountain of Transfiguration, light eternal flooding the scene, Jesus standing by ancient heroes of the faith who symbolize in their presence the law and the prophets.

Most of us, I think, would be sure that if we witnessed such goings-on we would be willing to say, "I have seen God."

Moses knows the ground on which he stands is sacred. He has been in the Lord's presence a lot.

Certainly the disciples are convinced that they have been caught up into the presence of the Holy, the presence of the Most High and Almighty God.

As usual with the disciples, it is Peter who speaks up. Peter always rushes in where wise folk fear to tread. I have come to believe, that wherever we read an account in the gospels of Peter speaking or acting, Peter represents the Church, us. And his behavior here in Matthew 17 illustrates what I mean.

Confronted by the raw, pure, direct vision of God, Peter can't keep his mouth shut. Rather than falling down silent, and staying silent, Peter blurts out, "Lord, this is such a great moment and such a perfect spot, let's memorialize it by building a retreat center. We could have a nice chapel over there, some quiet rooms for meditation, a full-service cafeteria, nice guest rooms, maybe a spa, and, of course, a very tasteful gift shop. Let's stay here forever."

And a voice from heaven says, "This is my son, whom I love. Shut up and listen to him."

We can perhaps excuse the excitement Peter feels. He found God. He's having a literal mountain top experience. So did Moses. Accompanying these revelations were all the signals. Holy special effects galore.

My curiosity is about when Moses returned to his tribe at the foot of the mountain, and when Jesus and his disciples made their way down from the clouds of transfiguration: Did they see God there too?

This question matters a great deal to me because we don't live on the mountain top. We live at sea level... or below!

It gives me comfort in this life to know that Moses didn't stay on top of the mountain. And Jesus told his wonder-besotted followers when it was time to rejoin everyone else down below.

I suspect that if I haven't learned to see God down here, I might not notice him on a mountain top either. So, how do we sharpen our focus, open our eyes wider, and notice God wherever God is to be found? We might take a cue from the poets.

Poetry is the art of noticing the eternal in the ephemeral.

Thus Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out like shining from shook foil.

Or Wendell Berry:

The dust motes float
And swerve in the sunbeam,
As lively as worlds,
And I remember my brother
When we were boys
"We may be living on an atom
In somebody's wallpaper."

And Mary Oliver says:

Truly we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood....
Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment
and bow their heads.

And life lived well is poetry unto itself, or, perhaps, it is poetry because it is not unto itself.

To live well, and truly, and faithfully, and sanely is to behold the wonder around us, to see in the seemingly mundane the mystery of God, to recognize our own smallness of mind and being, to rejoice at being surprised by the presence of One Who Will Not Be Named, and to bow, yes, to bow silently in reverence wherever we may become aware of the always present God.

Amen.