

The Mountain of the Lord

Michael Jenkins

Exodus 33:12-23

October 18, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

A hundred years ago a young Swiss pastor spoke to a group of other pastors. He asked the question now familiar to generations of seminary students, pastors, and their long-suffering congregations: "Why do people come to church?" After several rhetorical flourishes, he answered his own question, "To find out if it is true."

That young pastor, of course, became the most important Reformed theologian since John Calvin, the great Karl Barth. He asked his question in the shadow of the First World War when his favorite Christian professors endorsed a war of opportunity in the name of German nationalism. It's hard for us in the United States to calculate the negative impact of that war on European church membership.

Droves of people across Europe left the church after that war, seeing the church simply as a tool of the swollen pride of the various European nations. They've never really come back.

Perhaps, for that moment in time, Barth's question was the perfect question. Is it true? The message of the risen Christ which gave early Christians the courage to face down the Roman Empire, is it true? Of course, as we now know, this question took on even great power just a decade later with the rise of Nazism and the growth of authoritarian governments throughout Europe. Is it true?

The woman who confronted that young Baptist minister in Alabama not long ago, feeling that his preaching of the Sermon on the Mount had collided with her politics: she was struggling with that question when she said to her preacher, "What Jesus says is all very well and good, but I don't have to live by it." And that young Baptist preacher, driven from his church and community, struggled with that question too. Is it true?

I find it fascinating to think that this question, perhaps more than any other, marks the decline in religious optimism in the Twentieth Century, a century that many people were sure would see the arrival of God's kingdom on earth. That's why the flagship magazine of mainline Protestant Christianity was in 1900 named, "*The Christian Century*."

But that century, begun in hope, ended-up the most deadly, as any of the service members of the greatest generation can attest, the bloodiest, the most violent in all of human history. No wonder that Barth's question kept echoing through the century. It never went away, as even the pews of Protestant churches across our country became increasingly less crowded. Is it true?

Well, again, I find it fascinating that the century began with this question, because if there's a bookend, it came in 1997, not from a preacher or a theologian, but from a sociologist of religion, who, made a statement that reverberates to this day.

People in contemporary American society, Don Miller wrote, are yearning for a “transcendent experience of the sacred” which conveys “the self-transcending and life-changing core of all true religion.”

Twenty years on from his comment, I do not find us any more optimistic about the human condition or the human ability to redeem itself or the world around us, than we were in 1997 or 1920, for that matter. If anything, I find disappointment on the rise. I find us lacking in confidence in ourselves, lacking trust in one another, divisive and divided, splintering into ever smaller tribes, suspicious of the motivations of others even to accomplish together the smallest of common goods, failing to attend to long-term needs, in grief but without much hope, watching our grandchildren’s inheritance being sown to the whirlwind of generations of bad choices.

And then I remember another story which reminds me that history is as replete with reruns as cable television.

Thousands of years ago, Moses came down from the Mountain of the Lord bearing tablets of stone on which the finger of God spelled out laws intended to guide us to live together. From the smoke on the mountain, Moses descended into a frenzied camp, given over, in his absence, to the worship of false gods. This querulous people, murmuring, griping, complaining about accommodations and menu choices, had asked their priest Aaron to make for them gods to worship, gods to whom they might sacrifice. And Aaron, ever obliging, obliged.

If there were ever a moment when a sociologist of religion might shake his head and wonder at the efficacy of religion, when rank and file cynicism might seem justifiable, surely it was then. The people whom God delivered from slavery loved their bondage too much to let go of it. They would not endure the burden of freedom. They shuddered at the prospect of uncertainty and refused to embrace the invisible God.

It is after all of this mess that Moses, in our text today, ascended to the heights again and God revealed himself to Moses. What a strange time, we might think, for epiphany. Wouldn’t a spiritual breakthrough like this be more likely when we’re up? Mmmm. No. This makes perfect sense. God does not spurn those who in the foxholes of life cry out for comfort. It is when we are most down that we most need God’s presence.

First Moses simply asks the Lord to reassure him that the Lord would never depart from him and his people. Just that. And the Lord did reassure him. “My presence will go with you, — and I will give you rest.”

Then Moses asks. “Show me your glory.”

Of all the things to request of God in such a moment of crisis as this! What difference could seeing the glory of God possibly make? Of all the impractical requests, doesn’t this take the cake?

And the Lord was pleased with Moses' request. And the Lord said, "I will cause my goodness to pass in front of you. And I will speak my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion upon whom I will have compassion. But you cannot see my face, for no one can see my face and live."

We are so accustomed to think of life as a series of problems to be solved and predicaments to endure, of challenges to be overcome, riddles to unwind and labyrinths to walk.

We look to each other, and to our relative inability to make anything work well for long. Change is the order of the day. History really is just one darned thing after another. Nothing stays fixed. Nothing is certain. The future can neither be known nor controlled. And the cynic cries "foul! All is foul!"

And if anyone ever had reason to throw his hands up, it was Moses. And if Moses had placed his faith in the capacity of his people, he would have had ample reason to give up. But in the midst of this mess, Moses discovered where his heart might find rest, in the presence and the glory of the Lord.

Just saying this out-loud makes me feel strange, irrelevant, foolish.

"Then the Lord said to Moses: 'There's a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in that rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back, but my face you must not see.'

We come to church with these words or something like them on our lips. "Is it true?" Or maybe we've given up even asking that question. We yearn for a self-transcending experience of the sacred, something that promises to change us, because we know we haven't arrived yet. Or maybe we're less sure every day that we can transcend ourselves and our self-interests. We live in an age of uncertainty and dismay, and we feel that we are always trying to fix the unfixable with broken tools.

And today, your pastor comes along to tell you that the answer is to look upon a God we can't see, and to watch his goodness pass in front of us, to listen to him speak his name that nobody since Moses has even heard spoken; that the best we can hope for is a glimpse of his backside, because his face is so glorious in its beauty that we wouldn't survive looking into his eyes?

Is that what your pastor has to say to you in the midst of this mess?

Yes. That's it.

Amen.