

<Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2:1-12; Matthew 17:1-9>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

In the heart of Alaska, the biggest state of our Union by area but one of the smallest in terms of population ratio, the mighty Denali - literally meaning "The Tall One" - rises majestically above the tundra and plains. The tallest peak in North America, and claiming the title of tallest mountain in the world when measured from base to peak, Denali commands the landscape for miles upon miles around it, and offers views of the region which are incomparable.

That is, if you can see it. Which is only about 30% of the time, at best.

One of the most majestic and certainly the tallest peak on the North American continent, and for the vast majority of time it is shrouded in fog and clouds, obscuring any attempt to view it, and certainly obscuring any view from it, should you make the ascent. As we again hear the stories of Moses meeting with God on the mountain, and Jesus with the three disciples atop the mountain, such a dynamic as Denali being hidden from view is a fitting one for this day in the life of the church, leading us to consider the question: What keeps us from seeing the Kingdom of God?

That's certainly a broad question, with any number of answers, each as unique as each of us gathered here in worship. Some answers might include grief or anger over situations and injustices within our world, or fear of an unknown and uncertain future, or the disappointment of expectations unmet or even hopes which are misrepresented. I know, from talking with many of you over the past weeks and months, that much of our own heartache - individually and communally - is rooted in such realities. Generally speaking, the dynamics that keep us from seeing the Kingdom of God, which obscure our theological vision, are related to the realities of our daily living which shift into the realm of distracting us from God's presence and calling, notably whether or not our expectations are met.

More and more I believe that our focus on unmet expectations is an area of our lives which has more sway on us and our ability to recognize the nearness of God than most others. It is also an area we see evident and addressed frequently in the interactions between Jesus and the disciples, and this reading of the Transfiguration is no different.

Jesus, knowing that he is about to turn his attention and energy toward Jerusalem and the crucifixion, pauses to bring Peter, James, and John along with him to the top of a mountain. Now, Israel is a small country, and on a clear day from a good height, and in the right place, you can catch a glimpse of the entire countryside, including the Mediterranean coast in one direction and the Sea of Galilee in the other direction. Perhaps the disciples thought Jesus just wanted some company while he got away and cleared his head for a bit, and appreciated the view of the region they had been traveling through, ministering to, and preaching in.

Perhaps they thought they knew the story of what has been happening, and what is about to happen as they move toward Jerusalem. And I'll give you a hint: their expectation of that movement, of realizing a warrior king come to liberate the people by routing the Roman occupation, is not what will end up happening.

Regardless, they are atop the mountain with Jesus, and while they are there they find themselves joined in presence by Moses and Elijah, as well! What more affirmation of their expectations could they ask for, than to have Moses join them, who led the people out of bondage in Egypt, and Elijah, who overthrew all the prophets of Baal. Certainly, the disciples now know what is to come, and it will be glorious! And so Peter, naturally Peter, wants to establish three tents, so that they may all remain there and perhaps use it as a mountain base for what is to come. And then! Then the cloud comes down and envelops them all, and certainly, certainly now their expectations will be fulfilled.

But something new is happening, and James, John, and especially Peter can't recognize it at first because their vision is obscured by their own expectations. They are inhibited from fully recognizing the nature and structure of the Kingdom of God because their eyes are already filled by what they expect to see realized.

I had high hopes when my parents and I boarded the train in Anchorage to take the trip up to Denali for two days. When we left Anchorage, the sun was shining and the skies were blue, unmarked and unmarred by any whisp of a cloud. I expected that I would likewise be able to behold Denali in all its glory. You can probably guess that was not my experience, that we arrived to Denali in rain and oppressive, surrounding fog. But that was not the real tragedy. The real tragedy is that I had been so expectant, so set on seeing such an awesome aspect of God's creation that I nearly missed everything else that was right there in front of me.

Peter, James, and John carry with them their own expectations of what is to come, how Jesus' ministry will continue, and how the Kingdom of God will be realized. Looking at the world around them, at Roman soldiers enforcing occupation, at Roman leaders making decisions and laws which determine their daily living...looking at a myriad of realities which do not meet their expectations but only elicit grief, and anger, and frustration, the disciples are unable to see where God is actually leading them due to the evidence of their eyes.

They must have been startled by God's voice thundering around them. But with their physical vision now clouded, they then needed the reminder that their calling, despite their own expectations, their calling was first and foremost to follow Jesus. To listen to him. To heed him. They must first follow Jesus, committing to go where he leads them, and then they must let their vision be obscured for a time from worldly realities in order to better recognize the coming of God's Kingdom as it actually is. And then, in better recognizing it, they are able to continue working toward it. The same is true for us today.

That asks a lot of us. But such an invitation does not ask us to simply close our eyes to the world around us but rather invites us to refocus first on the Kingdom, so that we might then better be able to work to see it realized. The invitation is to come into the presence of God and, even if our physical sight is impeded - perhaps especially then - we are invited to open the eyes of our hearts, minds, and spirits to God for illumination and understanding.

On that trip with my parents I did not see Denali, but I did see all other kinds of flora and fauna, of wildlife and awesome dynamics of creation. And I recognized the value of time spent with my family. Peter, James and John came to recognize the presence of God and heeded the invitation to continue following where Jesus led, even if the Kingdom being realized was in a way they did not previously imagine.

Our world, perhaps even our lives, may be so distracted by everything our eyes do take in that our hearts cannot focus on the presence of God, and the invitation to draw even closer. In our grief, our anger, our frustration and uncertainty, our vision can be inhibited from recognizing such a reality. But God is present, nonetheless, and the Kingdom of God continues to take root, and continues to be realized more and more as we commit to living it out. As we approach the season of Lent, what will we focus our vision on as we seek to realize God's kingdom, God's presence in our lives, in our world? And in such renewed recognition, may we indeed proclaim a kingdom of good news, a reality of hope, healing, and wholeness for all the world. May our eyes see it clearly. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*