

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: This Is My Beloved Son ... Listen to Him!
Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum
Friendship Village of Dublin, Ohio,
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Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

Prayer: May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts...

I am going to use a fancy word at the very beginning of this sermon. That word is “theophany.”

A theophany is a visible, audible, or tangible manifestation of God. There are more than 50 theophanies in the Old Testament, such as the burning bush speaking to Moses, the pillars of cloud/fire leading the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt to the promised land, or those three divine visitors to Abraham. These temporary, supernatural events demonstrate God's presence and serve to deliver critical, divine messages.

And, I promise, that is the last time I will use the word theophany in this sermon.

One of the Old Testament readings in the lectionary for this Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, comes from Exodus. It is the story of Moses going up the mountain to encounter God in the burning bush after which he came down with the Ten Commandments. We heard that story in our Call to Worship this morning. And we just heard the reading from Matthew about the appearance of God on the mountaintop where Jesus was transfigured.

In both Exodus and in Matthew, God appeared to human beings in ways they could perceive, whether they understood what was happening or not. Both times God arrived in a cloud. And both times God was present in a way that just scared the heck out of everyone except Moses and Jesus.

Take the experience of Moses. Based on the descriptions in Exodus of clouds and fire on the mountaintop, it is possible that Mt. Sinai was an active volcano. We don't really know which mountain in the Sinai Peninsula it was but based on what the Bible tells us about it, going up to its top must have been scary.

God had told Moses to bring along with him three priests and seventy of the elders to worship God at a distance. Then he told Moses to leave this company behind and come up onto the mountaintop to receive the stone tablets with the commandments and the law.

Imagine how frightened those seventy-three people must have been. Indeed, when Moses came down from the mountaintop, his face was shining with the glory of God to such an extent that the people were terrified and made him put a veil over his face. If they feared even the reflection of God in Moses' face, just imagine how scared they must have been of going into the very presence of God on the mountain.

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God told Moses to leave those seventy-three folks behind on the mountainside. Moses did as he was told, went farther up the mountain with Joshua, and waited six days. On the seventh day God appeared as a devouring fire, spoke from a cloud, and called Moses to the top of the mountain where Moses stayed for a long time, forty days and nights -- that's the Biblical way of saying "a long time."

We don't fully appreciate the fearsomeness of this story because we know how it turned out. We remember that God gave Charlton Heston the Ten Commandments, and that the movie was a huge hit! We know what happened!

But Moses did not know the movie was going to be a hit! The elders did not know. Joshua did not know. Moses might have disappeared into that cloud, might have dropped into a deep crevasse, might have been burned up by molten lava, anything could have happened! Moses might never have come back.

But Moses trusted God and obeyed God, and Moses did come back. Moses came back with the words of God in the Ten Commandments and the law which in many ways has marked the beginning of our long journey to replace rule by power with the rule of law in human affairs—a journey that continues still.

Just as with those seventy-three who went onto the mountain with Moses, I have no doubt that fear raised its ugly head among the disciples of Jesus as well. Jesus had just finished teaching them that he was headed to Jerusalem where he would suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day. Peter had been shocked. This was not supposed to happen to the Jewish Messiah, a warrior-king who would conquer, not be killed. Jesus responded to Peter telling Jesus not to talk like that with the now-famous line "Get behind me, Satan!" Then, Jesus asked the disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. That would have made me nervous!

So, when Jesus asked Peter and James and John to walk with him up to the top of a nearby high mountain -- again we don't know which mountain -- their fears might again have been aroused. Who was this guy who had just told them he was going to be killed in Jerusalem? And if Jesus was going to be killed, what would happen to them? Were they going to be killed also? What was going to happen to them on this mountaintop? If they went up, were they ever going to come back down?

Nonetheless the disciples followed Jesus up the mountain where, Matthew tells us, Jesus was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Jesus' shining face and bright white clothes were a sure sign of the presence of the divine.

Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. Why Moses and Elijah? We don't know exactly. However, as was to happen to Jesus, remember that Moses and Elijah were initially rejected by the people but were eventually vindicated by God. Like Jesus both worked miracles. Perhaps Moses and Elijah were meant to represent the Jewish scriptures alongside

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Jesus, Moses standing for the Law and Elijah for the Prophets, with Jesus as the Scripture's fulfillment.

If the three disciples had been nervous and anxious at the start of this trip, imagine how they must have felt when Moses and Elijah showed up!

There are many people who try to reassure themselves and get control in a new and uncomfortable situation by talking their way through it. So, Peter tried to get some measure of control of this situation by suggesting to Jesus that the disciples build tents or booths to commemorate the event, something that would have fit Jewish traditions associated with the Festival of Booths.

Even as Peter was struggling for control in this anxiety-provoking situation, a bright cloud overshadowed them and the voice of God interrupted: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Well, the voice of God did it. Now the disciples were completely overcome by their fear. Their legs gave way, and they fell to the ground—couldn't move, paralyzed by fear.

Jesus came and touched the fallen disciples, saying "Get up and do not be afraid." The disciples looked up and saw no one except Jesus, standing alone. And Jesus walked down the mountain with the disciples.

The elements of these two stories of trips to the mountain are similar. Despite their fear and anxiety, those anxious and uncertain human beings obeyed the divine command and walked into a dangerous situation. They did not know how it was going to come out but their trust in God and in Jesus overcame their fears. And because of their excursion into the unknown and into danger, transformation happened.

When Moses came down from the mountain, it is the former Hebrew slaves who, by the giving of the law, were transformed into the people of God. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is transfigured, revealing himself to the three chosen disciples by his appearance and by God's words announcing Jesus as the true Son of God. And surely the faith of Peter, James, and John was strengthened by their experience, and they were confirmed as leaders among the disciples.

We are still early in this new year of 2026. We don't know how the new year will turn out. We carry our hopes with us into the year, but we also carry our fears with us as well. What will happen to us? Will we be okay?

The word of God tells us that we will be ok if we faithfully listen to and trust and obey God's word. Listening, trusting, and obeying might also cause us to be a witness for our Savior and perhaps even experience transformation.

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“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Those are the same words God spoke at Jesus’ baptism, with three words added at the end.

Pay attention to those last three words. “Listen to him.” Listen to Jesus. Read and hear and obey what Jesus tells us in the scriptures. Pray and meditate and listen through the Holy Spirit for God’s word for our lives.

“Listen to him.” Listen to Jesus. We are the body of Christ to one another and to the world. Let us speak lovingly to one another to be Christ to another. Let us listen intently to one another so that the Christ in each of us can hear the Christ in the other ... so that in dialogue together we all may be transformed.

God does not come to us only in a cloud on top of a mountain. I think that God, as the Bible says, stands in front of us all the time with his hand stretched out to us. God wants to be our helpmate. It is up to us to respond.

I was called to be an ordained minister relatively late in my life, at the age of 52. Looking back on it sometimes I think that God had been calling me to be an ordained minister all my life. Did I choose not to hear him? Or maybe I was not prepared until later in life to be ready to hear him.

Somehow when I did hear God’s call to ordained ministry, it was not a scary thing. It was a joy-filled thing. I wasn’t afraid ... maybe I should have been! But I was not afraid. And God made a way when it looked like it would be impossible to change careers and keep my family together and provide for them financially. God made a way.

There is nothing unique about me or God’s call to me. It happens all the time. I think that God is calling each of us to be faithful servants of our Savior every minute and every hour and every day of our lives. God may be calling us to some great and glorious job on God’s behalf as he did with Moses and other great servants of God in the Bible. However, God may also be calling us to things that seem small. And yet those small things may have enormous importance.

For example, I believe that God is calling us to smile. That’s right, smile. It is amazing how much a smile matters. God wants us to be the face of Christ to one another and call out to the Christ in each other. Imagine how hard that is if we walk around with a frown on our face.

If we don’t smile, our faces may freeze into permanent frowns!! It is amazing how much friendlier a place the world is when we smile. People tend to smile back when we smile at them. Smiling will improve our mood and the moods of those who work and live around us. There is nothing specifically Christian about smiling but it is really, really, hard to share the good news of Christ if we walk around looking miserable.

We may not feel like smiling ... we should do it anyway. Even if we are faking it, it is a wonderful feeling when others smile back at us. That is a transformation for them!

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And, when others smile at us, it is amazing how much our mood will improve. We might get to the point where we feel truly like smiling! And that will be a transformation for us. It may not transform the world, just a small piece of the world. But that is a start, and, if God is in it and with us, who knows where it may lead? Can you imagine turning on the television news and the reporter breathlessly announces that the world has suddenly been overtaken by an epidemic of smiling, started, says the reporter, by a band of transformed Christians at Friendship Village in Dublin, Ohio? May it be so ...

Amen.