

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 19, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce
Baden Powell Sunday**

**Readings: Exodus 19:1-7
1 Kings 19:9-13
Matthew 17:1-8**

Sermon: The Summit (Transfiguration Sunday)

Exodus 19:1-7

Three months after leaving Egypt the Israelites entered the Wilderness of Sinai. They followed the route, arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai, and set up camp. Israel camped there facing the mountain.

As Moses went up to meet God, God called down to him from the mountain: "Speak to the House of Jacob, tell the People of Israel:

'You have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to me. If you will listen obediently to what I say and keep my covenant, out of all peoples you'll be my special treasure. The whole Earth is mine to choose from, but you're special: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.' "This is what I want you to tell the People of Israel."

Moses came back and called the elders of Israel together and set before them all these words which God had commanded him.

The Law

So let me introduce you to Moses: I don't know whether you have watched films like Ten Commandments or Exodus: Gods and Kings, but I don't believe Moses looked like Charlton Heston or Christian Bale. Moses did some heroic things, so naturally we picture him like the heroes in our comic books or characters in a Marvel movie, only biblically dressed. First of all we usually make him a white guy, when we know his ancestry would have been semitic, with all the physical characteristics of someone from that Afro-Asiatic ethnic group.

Secondly, the scripture shows us someone who was not brave. He had to be cajoled, persuaded, even threatened into leadership, let alone heroic acts.

I've always imagined that Moses must have been a bit of a nerd. You know, to survive in the Egyptian palace, with all its intrigues and conspiracies. He might have been a foster cousin to the heir, the prince who later became Pharaoh. But if Moses had been that strong handsome guy who we see portrayed in the films, then I don't think he would have lasted very long. Egyptian pharaohs weren't known for putting up with rivals, and they had a lot of soldiers and swords at their disposal.

No, I imagine that, growing up in Egypt, Moses was pretty good at fading into the shadows, of biting his tongue, of being pleasant to people but not so good that others might have looked to him as a candidate when they were unhappy with the current leadership.

We also know that when God called to Moses from the burning bush, Moses politely declined the promotion from farmer to hero. T-tt- ell the Pharoah to llll-et my ppppeople go? Not me, no way. Can't you see I have a speech impediment? Plus, I have a criminal record in Egypt. God, you better keep looking, because I am not leadership material.

But God persisted. In Moses the nerd, God found the right person, maybe **because** Moses was so humble and imperfect, a guy who was willing to just listen. A guy who would buy into God's vision, and then wait for the next vision to unfold before planning his next step. Moses was really good at listening.

Thus Moses became not just a hero, one who acted bravely, but he was one who listened bravely as well. We don't usually think of listening as a particularly heroic action. But that is what made Moses a hero for us, because he was one who listened for and to God. He became the one who transmitted God's vision, God's promise and, most importantly, God's law to the people.

The Israelites had been slaves for so long, and had so little freedom. Once Moses liberated them and crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness, the people of God had to decide how they were going to rule themselves.

When Moses went up the mountain, as we heard from the book of Exodus today, Moses opened his ears and he **received** the law that would guide the people in faithfulness.

Then he would go down the mountain and offer God's word to the people. You might have a very stereotypical image in your head of Moses (or maybe it is Charlton Heston) standing on the mountainside with two stone tablets, the ten commandments carved into the stone for posterity. I know I do!

Well, God's law is a lot more fluid and flexible than a pair of stone tablets. Moses represented "the Law" to the people, not just because he was strong enough to hold up stone tablets, but because he was in relationship with God, and could interpret or apply God's priorities for the community. When situations didn't fit the 10 commandments, Moses himself became the law. And that's why we will find him on the mountain again in another of our scripture stories this morning.

1 Kings 19:9-13

When Elijah got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep. Then the word of God came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?"

"I've been working my heart out for you" said Elijah. "The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."

Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before God. God will pass by." A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but God wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper. When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?"

The Prophets

Now I want to introduce you to Elijah. Elijah was one of the first major prophets of Israel. When you think of prophecy you might think of someone who predicts the future. But in biblical tradition the prophet is someone who listens to God right now. They bring a holy perspective to what is happening in the present moment, which may or may not include consequences for the future.

Prophets became necessary when the people of God elected to have a king. That changed the way the nation made decisions, well, basically the king made all the decisions, and sometimes the decisions they made didn't reflect God's priorities. Prophets arose, like a loyal opposition, to call the king back to God.

Elijah's main opponents were King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Over and over again, the prophet and the royal couple confronted one another over who would rule people's hearts. Would the people be devoted to the Canaanite religion of Ba-al? Or would they be loyal to Yahweh, the god of Israel?

The god Ba-al demanded sacrifices and fancy temples, robes for the priests and offerings that lined Ahab and Jezebel's pockets. But Yahweh wanted compassion and justice between people everywhere. God wanted the king and queen to serve the people, not exploit them.

One day Elijah and the priests of Ba-al went up the mountain to battle it out in a kind of holy duel. It involved lighting a fire under the sacrificial meat, with no flame or flint, just calling down the power of their God to start the fire.

Well, the priests of Ba-al went first, but they didn't have much success. Then Elijah stepped forward and called on God, and a lightning bolt started not only the fire, but it split rocks in two and scattered Ba-al's priests.

Ahab and Jezebel were not happy with the outcome. They swore to get rid of Elijah, which was pretty bold considering how he had just demonstrated lightning bolts from heaven.

Still their threats made Elijah full of fear, and when he called out, it seemed like God wasn't answering. So Elijah ran away. He ran as far as he could, until he couldn't run any more. He went up a mountain and hid in a cave.

It was then that God's voice came to him again. Elijah crept to the entrance of the cave to look and see what mighty signs God would send him. First he saw a terrible hurricane, with wind so strong it broke rocks in two. But he did not see God there. Then he felt the earth quake and shift under his feet. Even though tall trees toppled into the quake, though, Elijah couldn't find God there either. And finally a fire, destroying everything in its path, but God wasn't in the fire either.

Then there was silence, and in the silence, Elijah heard God's quiet voice asking him what he was doing hiding in a cave, when there was so much still to be done to bring the people back to God.

Sometimes we look for God only in the big crises: Elijah's mountain story teaches us that God is like the still, small voice that is with us everyday. Sometimes we think that God only favours the powerful or the righteous. But Elijah teaches us that even a small voice has the power to change the world.

If Moses' law was designed to bring order out of the chaos of the wilderness, then Elijah's prophecy was designed to unsettle us when we have grown into patterns of apathy or cynicism.

And that is why we will find Elijah too alongside Moses on another mountain in our final scripture story.

Matthew 17:1-8

Six days later, three disciples saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain.

His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light.

Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.

Peter broke in, "Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain - one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?"

While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him."

When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death.

But Jesus came over and touched them. "Don't be afraid."

When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus.

The Summit

I am hoping I don't have to introduce you to Jesus, instead I will focus on this mountain top experience he had with Elijah and Moses. What I will say about Jesus is that he was born and shaped by the same profound connection with God that Moses and Elijah had. His relationship with God was inspired with the stories that he learned from his Jewish family and Jewish community. Sometimes we are tempted to treat Jesus as the founder of Christianity, a new religion. But Jesus was a Jew, and all of his teachings and healings are in line with the Jewish tradition.

So when Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James and John, it was no accident that the men he met up there, Elijah and Moses, represented the law and the prophets from their Jewish tradition. I don't think Peter, James or John would have known what those two actually looked like, but somehow they just knew: In that special place, on that special day, Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus about all the things they had in common.

The story of this event is called the Transfiguration in our church tradition. On the one hand, it is because the gospels tell us that Jesus' face shone like it never had before – it was a holy and unprecedented transformation. On the other hand, it is also called the transfiguration because from this moment on, everything was transformed or changed – from the direction of Jesus' mission, to the disciples' understanding and commitment to follow him, to the courage to confront whatever obstacles stood in their way.

The Summit is the peak or the top of a mountain, but it's also the name we give a gathering of influential people, when they are seeking to share their knowledge to find their way forward in the face of some difficult situation. We have had summits that resolved wars, summits to address climate change, summits to talk about human rights or global pandemics.

So this is the summit which helps us to see what working together might look like for us. Too often Christianity has interpreted this and other scripture stories in the way that says: See Jesus

is the pinnacle, the top, the ultimate conclusion of God's work. He even has Moses and Elijah under his thumb.

For me, the transfiguration story is the story of how we need each other to fulfil those mountain top moments of God's mission at work. In Greek, which is the language of the Christian scriptures, there are 2 main words for time: there is chronos, which means what you see on your watch, phone or calendar: chronos is the seconds, minutes, hours and days that mark the passage of time.

Then there is Kairos time, a time you can't just write in your calendar and expect to have happen. Kairos is a special time, when different parts of life come together in harmony, and God just seems to bless and be very present in that moment. It is also a critical time. If you just let it pass or if you try to extend it, then it disappears. But if you ponder it, listen to it, let it change your life or your direction, then the Kairos moment has power.

The transfiguration story is the story of a Kairos moment in the ministry of Jesus. And it is an invitation for us to do likewise – to keep working in partnership, whether it be in church, groups like Guides and Scouts, so that we can work on the building up the world we all envision. Whether we call it God's kingdom or a better future is not the point. The point is raising up youth who care about the world around them, and who have leadership skills to make things happen. Using our talents and gifts and even our buildings to house a mission that feeds and cares for the neighbours around us. We need each other to make that vision real in our time and place.

May God lead us to the summit of working together, so that peace and compassion might be fulfilled through our time together. Thanks be to God, Amen