



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

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Ultimately Transcendent...

The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Exodus 24:12-18

¹² The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 34:27-31

²⁷ The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. ²⁸ He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.^e

The Shining Face of Moses

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

Matthew 17:1-9

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face

shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (NRSV)

Today is George Washington's Birthday. For my history buff of a mom, Washington's birthday was just an excuse for a family field trip to the Revolutionary War battlefield in White Plains. Now, you may never have heard of this skirmish, but in my home town it's actually known by its proper name, "The Battle of White Plains, Turning Point of the American Revolution."

It's not a very impressive park as battlefields go, but I still remember something more significant than a few commemorative cannons. I remember that when you squinted your eyes just so and looked up to where the Continental Army made its stand on Chatterton Hill, you could still feel the tension of great powers contending over an historic issue. I would understand the conflict better after tramping with my mom over sites from Lexington where it all began, to Yorktown where it all got worked out, but you could already feel the struggle just looking out over that little hillside in White Plains. All you had to do was squint your eyes.

This morning I want to suggest that we all need to squint our eyes a bit as we try to take in this strange story of the Transfiguration as well. There's something far more significant going on than shimmering prophets, bright clouds and booming voices. If we

^e Heb words

^f Or treaty, or testimony; Heb eduth

squint our eyes just so and we look up to where Peter and James and John and Jesus took their stand on the hillside of Mount Hermon, we too will get a sense of great powers contending over an historic issue. And we too will understand the conflict better if we start our tour back on the hillside where the struggle broke out on Mount Sinai, and if we conclude our tour here on the hillside where the struggle is getting worked out today, God's Acre.

What is this struggle? It's a 3,000 year-old conflict between our minds and our hearts. It's an age-old struggle between how our minds know God must be and how our hearts need God to be.

Go back far enough and you'll find a time when the theological imaginings of human minds and hearts were at peace. Every tribe worshipped a local tribal God, resident in a sacred rock or tree or temple. Our minds were content that the tribal God was just big enough, just transcendent enough to promise help when our human strength was exhausted. Our hearts were content that the tribal God was just present enough, just immanent enough to be readily knowable, relatable, addressable in the designated sacred object.

And then something happened. A notion of monotheism flickered on in human consciousness, and monotheism has an inexorable logic of its own. As Ancient Israel left behind the polytheism of its ancestors and neighbors, as Israel proclaimed a monotheistic faith in the one true God, the dynamic logic of monotheism propelled Israel to an ever higher consciousness of God's ultimate transcendence.

Think about it for a second. If there is only one true God, then the God on this side of the mountain must be the same God as on the other side of the mountain. The God of this tribe must be the same God as of the other tribe. God can no longer be confined to this rock or this tree, for we somehow have to account for God's presence everywhere. God must be greater than even the biggest mountain, the most powerful king, the most magnificent star.

In fact, the more Israel meditated on the meaning of God, the more Israel appreciated that God was necessarily beyond human imagining. As Isaiah heard

God say in chapter 55: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" [55:8-9.] After all, to borrow from modern scientific concepts, just why would the creature standing on the third planet from a mediocre star think it had the mental capacities to understand the mind and nature of the God who had created trillions of galaxies?

Ultimately, we can know of God only that which God chooses to reveal to us. But even here, every single word symbol the human mind might understand necessarily falls short of the full truth of God. As Paul Tillich would teach, it is even inadequate to call God a divine "being." After all, a being is presumed to have a location: a being is over here but not over there. And a being is presumed to begin here and end there. But none of these things can be said of God. God is everywhere, and God has no beginning and no end. It would be more adequate to call God the "ground of being" or that which makes all being possible in the first place.

Now, there is a fancy theological terms for this quality of a monotheistic God: we say God is "ultimately transcendent:" lying beyond the ordinary range of perception, beyond the limits of experience; "radically abstract."¹

Our minds may be driven to these concepts by the logic of monotheism, but our hearts rebel. For in our hearts we are inherently relational beings. We understand best, we see most deeply into the nature of our family, our friends, our pets, our world, when we relate to them. In fact, our Bible tells us that God made us for relationship with God and with one another. But just how do you relate to, how do you pray to, a "ground of being?" How does your heart love a God your mind says transcends any idea the heart can imagine?

The story goes that one day Paul Tillich was lecturing on how God was best understood as our "ultimate concern," when a fellow rose from the audience. "Well, Professor Tillich, this ultimate concern theory is all well and good, but what we all really want to know is whether the ultimate is concerned with us!"

Or to put it more personally, one day my son, Owen went up to Amy and said, "Mommy, you say God is

everywhere all the time. And He's always near me and watching me. But nobody can ever see him. Well, Mommy, doesn't that make God kind of a creep?"

And so, from the earliest emergence of Israel's monotheism, there has been a struggle between our minds and our hearts, a struggle between how our minds know God must be, and how our hearts need God to be. Our minds know God must be ultimately transcendent and abstract. Our hearts need God to be ultimately present, the fancy theological word is "immanent," and concrete.²

Which brings us to the hillside where Scripture says this struggle between mind and heart first broke out into the open: Mount Sinai. God summoned Moses to the mountaintop to receive the tablets of stone with the commandments. Now, had the people of Israel been able to keep an eye on old Moses trudging up the flanks of the mountain and been able to see God promptly hand down the tablets, we might have had a different story. But as Moses picked his way to the summit he was enveloped in a thick cloud of transcendent abstraction as the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. All that the people below could see for seven days was a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.

On the mountaintop, Moses clung to his faith. Enshrouded in a cloud of mystery, he waited obediently for God. On the seventh day, God called Moses out of the cloud and handed down the stone tablets containing the commandments, the very first of which was "You shall not make for yourself an idol."

But the wait proved too much for the people. Their hearts yearned for a God as present, as immanent, as concrete as, well, as a golden calf, so they fashioned themselves an idol. An idol they could see, understand, relate to seemed far more attractive than the mysterious cloud that had devoured their leader. For a moment, the very future of monotheism hung in the balance.

Of course, we know how this particular contest ended. Moses talked God out of destroying the faithless people, dashed the tablets on the rocks in anger, and burned the calf. [Exodus 33:20] The Lord inscribed a second set of tablets and Israel renewed its

covenant with the one true God, and embraced the ban on idolatry at the heart of its law. [Exodus 34:1]

The hillside occasion of our second struggle, the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon was remarkably similar to the setting on Mount Sinai. This time Jesus led his closest disciples up the mountain for an encounter with the one, true God. As they reached the summit Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, his face shining like the sun and his clothes a dazzling white. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared, conversing with Jesus.

Peter was appropriately awed by this mysterious demonstration of God's glory, recognizing the divine confirmation of his confession days before that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the son of the living God. [Matthew 16:16]. But, as usual, Peter couldn't leave well enough alone. He blurted out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." [Matthew 17:4.]

Peter didn't want a fleeting, transcendent epiphany, he wanted a permanent, concrete presence. He didn't want to return to the ambiguities of life and love in the valley, he wanted to stay on the peak in assured physical proximity to God. He didn't want to live and preach a mysterious path of faith in a God beyond human understanding, he wanted a mountaintop sinecure as the caretaker of God's walk-up booth. For a moment the very integrity of monotheism hung in the balance.

But God refused to be domesticated. There would be no idolatrous concrete huts, there would be no permanent mountaintop experience. Before Peter even finished speaking, God overshadowed him in a bright cloud, the same cloud of mystery that had enveloped Moses. As the disciples fell to the ground in fear, they heard God's voice boom out, saying only: "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

This brings us back to where we began this tour, gathered in our historic Meeting House, the third site of our continuing struggle. Now this serene Meeting House may not look like a scene of conflict, but it most assuredly is, and the battle is raging even as I speak.

Our Puritan forebears fought a life and death battle against the idolatry they perceived in the institutional religion of their time. The very name “Puritan” came from their zeal to purify the Church of England of all vestiges of idolatry. Archbishops, crosses, saints, statues, holy days, cathedrals, stained glass windows, these are all concrete human fabrications which, at their best, can point our hearts to the transcendent heart of God. But the Puritans understood that they also bear seeds of idolatry. Our hearts’ yearnings for relationship with a present, immanent, concrete manifestation of God always risks slipping into worshiping the concrete symbols themselves rather than the divine mystery to which they point. We kiss the archbishop’s ring, we pray to saint’s statue, we save our prayers for the holy cathedral.

And so, the Puritans stripped them out. When the Puritans built our first Meeting House in Canaan Parish, they took pains to make it look just like any other home. No steeple, no cross, no pillars, no stained glass windows, no statues. Just a 30 by 30 foot house on the corner where Park Street intersects St. John Place. They didn’t even call it a church, they called it their “Meeting House.”

But like Peter, our forebears yearned for concrete manifestations of the holy, and when they built our second Meeting House they added a steeple; and when they built our third Meeting House, they added churchy pillars and fine moldings. Finally, in 1959, they even added back in a temporary cross.

Now the point of this tour isn’t that we need to take down the cross, dismantle the steeple or strip out the molding. The point is that the struggle between how our minds know God must be, and how our hearts need God to be, the tension between the minds understanding of an ultimately transcendent God and the heart’s need for an ultimately immanent God continues on today for every one of us.

Every time we stamp our feet insisting that God do our nation’s bidding, on our schedule, to our satisfaction, we make the same mistake as the tribes of Israel, seeking to shrink God down to a tribal idol we can control. Every time we linger in a mountaintop experience of God rather than follow Jesus back down to the valley of love of neighbor and self-sacrifice, we make the same mistake as Peter

trying to capture a fleeting experience of God in a stone dwelling.

How are we to resolve our faith in a transcendent God and our yearnings for personal relationship? God gave us the answer on Mount Hermon at the Transfiguration. Remember Peter pressed to the ground and shivering in fear while the cloud of mystery overshadowed him? Suddenly he heard God’s own voice say, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” And then there was the human touch on his shoulder, Jesus saying “Get up and do not be afraid.” And then the story concludes: “And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” [17:8]

“Jesus himself alone.” This is the answer to the struggle that has raged for three thousand years. Jesus brings peace between our heart’s yearnings and our mind’s understandings.

Jesus himself alone is the bridge between our heart’s yearnings for relationship with an immanent God, and our mind’s understandings of a transcendent God. On the near side of the bridge is Jesus, the dimension of Jesus we see as the humble carpenter, the suffering servant who walked with us, talked with us and showed us what God’s love looks like, enfleshed as a human. He touches us and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” We know him. We understand him, we relate to him. He is God with us, but as ultimately immanent and concrete as another human being. As the theologians say, Jesus is fully human.

On the far side of the bridge is this same Jesus, but now the dimension of Jesus we see as God’s Christ, God’s creative word. He “was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” [John 1:3] He is still God with us, but as the ultimately transcendent, radically abstract God of all creation. As the theologians say, Jesus is fully divine.

In Jesus himself alone, God makes himself small for us so we can understand him, love him, pray to him. In Jesus himself alone, God becomes like we are so that we might become like God is.³

May this Lent be for us a season of prayer, reflection, and study on how Jesus bridges the gulf, reconciling us with our God. As we walk with Jesus these 40 days, may we come to know him, to love him, to understand him better as our brother, but may we also come to know, love and understand better the God to which Jesus points us. As John's prologue concludes, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." If we squint our eyes just so, we'll see. **Amen.**

1 "**Transcendent** 1. Surpassing others; preeminent or supreme. 2. Lying beyond the ordinary range of perception . . . 3b. In Kant's theory of knowledge, being beyond the limits of experience and hence unknowable. 4. Being above and independent of the material universe." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed. 2006.)

2 "**Immanent** 1. Existing or remaining within; inherent: *believed in a God immanent in humans.*" Ibid.

3 Martin Luther: See *True Faith in the True God*, Hans Schwarz, Augsburg Books, at p. 44-46.