

Kiama Jamberoo Uniting Church
Transfiguration
9.00am, Sunday 23 February 2020
Jamberoo

Law and Love

Reading: 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.

Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

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.'

Reflection

Let us pray,

God, the stories we have just heard bring us to describe you with words like awesome and glorious. And sometimes it is hard to wrap our minds around what that means.

Help us to engage with these stories that we might learn to live ever more deeply as your disciples, and to share your wisdom and love with the world we encounter. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

So today, we have two mountain stories, one from the beginning of God's involvement with God's people, and one from the life of Jesus. Let's see what they might have to teach us this morning.

Do you climb mountains?

Maybe once when you were younger? Do you still climb mountains in your mind?

Perhaps you could recall now a mountain you have climbed - maybe it was Mt Keira, or Mt Kosciusko, or...?

Why do we climb mountains? For the exercise? For the view?

As the view stretches out before us, it gives us a greater sense of the world around us. There is also a sense of achievement of getting to the top - physically, emotionally and sometimes spiritually too.

Many religious practices involve mountains - most peoples of the world recognise that there is something sacred about mountains. There is something about sitting high above the valley and considering where we fit in the world below us.

In the Hebrew world, mountains are the scene of divine revelation - God revealing God's self to God's people.

So it was in the ancient world, when Moses goes up Mount Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain and encounters God there.

Now when we turn to the story of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, we need to remember first that Matthew's gospel is written for a Jewish audience. It is grounded deeply in the prophetic announcements about the Jewish Messiah who would come to restore the kingdom of Israel.

So the symbolism of *Jesus* ascending the mountain would have been instantly recognised.

In both these stories, it is God who invites people to climb.

Moses hears directly from God.

Jesus invites Peter, James and John to join him on the climb. And on the mountain, they all hear God's voice embracing Jesus, and affirming his ministry.

Both Moses and Jesus encounter the "glory of God".

Moses' face shines.

Jesus shines.

God's radiance is reflected in those who encounter [him].

For Moses, when he is on top of the mountain, he is enveloped in cloud.

Jesus and the disciples, also, are enveloped in cloud.

In both experiences, it is a juxtaposition of the sense of unseeing, the view being blocked by the cloud; and being able to see in a new way, the revealing of a new or deeper truth.

In his encounter with God, Moses receives the Law - the tablets, or the Ten Commandments.

Jesus' encounter with God on the mountain makes an important connection for both the Jewish audience and for us between the God who gives the Law to Moses, the God of the prophets (Elijah); and the God of Jesus who re-shapes the Law to reflect God's love. Importantly, the Law is not replaced, it is "transfigured", re-shaped by Love.

Where in his encounter with God, Moses receives the Law,

Jesus' encounter with God reveals again in words echoed from his baptism, God's all-embracing love of God's Son - "This is my beloved Son. I am pleased with him. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

And it is this love, experienced by Jesus, in words heard by the disciples, that Jesus then explicitly shows the disciples. The love God pours out on God's Son is then expressed as Jesus turns towards his accompanying disciples.

Let me explain that...

If you compare Matthew's account of these events with the account in Mark's gospel (Mark 9:2-9), the disciples come off much better here in Matthew's gospel than with Mark. In both accounts, Peter asks a silly question, "shall I build shelters for everyone?", referring to a Jewish festival or holy day. He blurts it out, not knowing what else to say. And in both accounts they are all frightened by what they have experienced. But where in Mark's gospel, Peter and the disciples, fairly abruptly, are left terrified, here, Matthew describes Jesus offering restoration. While the disciples are cowering, Jesus goes to them and tells them to get up and to not be frightened. The disciples are overawed by their Divine encounter, but Jesus encourages them to stand on their own two feet and not to fear. It is a moment of profound grace that lifts them out of their perceived inadequacy and smallness, restoring them to participation in the ministry to which they are called.

And when they return to the plain, both Moses and Jesus experience a very different, and perhaps disappointing, reality. Moses returns to find the people of Israel have built the golden calf. And Jesus returns to find the disciples struggling to bring healing to someone suffering with epilepsy.

As we begin to turn our attention to the journey of Lent - that starts on Wednesday - I want to invite you to hold onto this story. For the disciples, this experience would carry them through the difficult days of Jesus' approach to Jerusalem, his arrest and death. In Matthew's account of the events, Jesus tells Peter, James and John not to tell anyone about what they had seen until "after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (Matthew 17:9). For Matthew, it is not until the disciples encounter the Risen Christ, that the full understanding of who Jesus is will be realised.

So as we turn our attention to Jesus' journey towards his death and resurrection, hold onto this story as it holds the intersection of earth and heaven, as it points us to Jesus who reveals the depth of life and divine reality. Just as the table around which we gather this morning also points us to that intersection - our experience of life as it is in this moment, with these people, but tinged, perhaps drenched, in the love and peace of God's divine grace.

Shining God,
you change us in ways we cannot imagine.
You ask us to follow you, and then show us the way to go.
You send us into your world.
As we climb and descend the mountain today, guide us in our next steps in proclaiming your love. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield

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