

Sermon for Sunday, February 10, 2013 Exodus 34:29-35 Luke 9:28-36, "Changed"

If we listen to what happened in readings from scripture today, we would think that seeing God is a pretty scary or dangerous thing.

Moses goes up to the mountain, and is in the presence of God. He sees God, and God gives him the Ten Commandments. When he comes down from the mountain he is glowing like the South Anna nuclear reactor. It's a scary thing, how much he is glowing, and the people are so frightened that Moses realizes he has to cover his face. The glow is too frightening to them. So he covers himself with the veil whenever he talks to the Israelites, and only takes the veil off when he goes to talk to God.

That seems to be the thing about being in the presence of God. It changes you.

Something similar happens in the Gospel. Jesus goes up to the top of the mountain to pray, bringing Peter and John and James, and suddenly Moses and Elijah appear. Peter and James and John know their scripture, and remember that Moses and Elijah have been dead for quite a long while, and now all three of them – Jesus, Moses and Elijah – are glowing like a super-strong LED headlight. God's voice is heard, affirming Jesus as His son. They're scared – that sure does seem to be the general reaction to glowing people – so they fall to the ground.

The presence of God changes people. There is an energy in that presence like the heat and light of the sun. So it's no surprise that they glow. And it's also no surprise that the glow is a little intimidating.

And yet we cannot turn away from the glow, can we? It is so beautiful, so soul-warming, that we are drawn to it, even as we are frightened by it.

Perhaps we are beginning to understand that there is a certain amount of work involved in getting ourselves to a place where we can see God. In the case of Moses and of Jesus and the three disciples, they have to climb a mountain to get there.

And the people of Israel, faced with this glowing Moses who brings God's word to them, have to see beyond the veil with which Moses covers his face – they have to get beyond the glow to hear the words.

It seems that getting to know God requires some effort on our part.

Sometimes the work is climbing mountains. Other times, perhaps it is simply surviving the challenges of life.

I'm thinking of the trip that Doug and I took to Ireland last summer, and the monster seven-hour hike we took over the extremely challenging limestone terrain of the Burren region. Some parts were so difficult, that all of our concentration was centered on the next step. Some parts were just plain old steep and hard. But there was a view from the top – the farms and fields running down into Galway Bay - that was transcendent, and I doubt that it would have affected us anywhere near as much if we had had an easy time of it. About five hours into the

hike, we took a break and I lay on my back, soaked with sweat despite the 50 degree temperature, trying to catch my breath. The leader was reading a poem about reconnecting with one's ancestors – a potent image for me, going to the land of my forebears and thinking of my father and his people in particular. And in the midst of it, the breeze sweeping across the top of the hill was like God's caress. Not my father's, but my heavenly father's. In that moment, I felt God's presence and God's energy flowing into me, giving me what I needed to continue the last leg of the hike, down to a house where the meal that would feed our bodies and souls awaited.

Would I have felt God on that cool afternoon had I not gone on the hike? Maybe, maybe not. But I can attest the intensity of that feeling was due in part to the intensity of the work that preceded it.

So what is the work that we need to do to know God, to see him before us? Do we need to climb mountains, or wander in the desert for forty years, to understand who God is?

Perhaps the answer is found in the wise words of Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr. He offers a very different kind of prescription: prayer. He writes that "Prayer lives in pure open moments of right here, right now. This is enough, this is fullness. If it is not right here right now, it doesn't exist. If we don't know God now, why would we know God later? If we don't see God now, would the eyes be prepared to see God later?"

No strenuous hike, no appearance of those saints long gone, no booming voice from the clouds. Just prayer. For Rohr, prayer is the way to be present to God and to open ourselves to what God has to say to us. Now, the likelihood that our faces will be glowing so brightly that we have to cover ourselves so we don't scare the kids or the dog is pretty slim. And yet, don't we feel different when we find that place of stillness so we can be aware of God's presence?

In a few days, we will begin Lent, that season when we are to examine our hearts. We are supposed to see how we can be closer to God and to what God has in mind for us...to know God more deeply. That is what Lent is about, using whatever means necessary to get there. And Rohr reminds us that if we want to get a taste of that glow, an insight into the God who is right beside us, the starting point is prayer. Just prayer. Let this holy season of Lent be the time that you feel the spark of a deeper relationship with God, with prayer.

Amen.