

“The Making of a Covenant”

It has been awhile since I thought about the maple tree in my backyard when I was a boy. That tree was my “go-to” place when I wanted to get away. I loved climbing up into the branches. Thinking back, I realize there was more going on than just wanting to get away from my brother and sister. As a kid, I didn’t have the language or experience to say exactly why that tree was important to me but I know more now. I think I climbed the tree to be closer to God. Let me say, as a disclaimer for the concern of safety, that I was always careful climbing up there, especially since a youth in our church had fallen from a tree and been seriously hurt. So, I’m not recommending we all go out today and climb a tree in order to be with God. No, it was probably not the safest choice, to climb up so high into the branches, but that’s the odd thing about it, I did feel safe up there. There was a set of tree limbs that were just the right size to hold me in a hammock sort of way and it was calming, reassuring, and peaceful up there. Some might say I felt this assurance because of the way the sunlight sparkled through the leaves. You could make the point that the gentle swaying of the branches when the breeze was blowing rocked me like a mother does a child. Maybe so. But, I really think I climbed up there to feel closer to God. There’s something intuitive in us that assumes the higher we go the closer we are to God. Now, we know God isn’t actually “up there” somewhere but there is this longing in us, I think, to step away from the confines of the earth and to be assured of God’s glory. The world can be a beautiful place, so this isn’t meant to criticize the earth but sometimes we look around and we say, “There’s got to be more than this.” It’s this longing to reach beyond ourselves and to experience God that keeps us searching for places where we catch at least a glimpse of what’s eternal. If not a tree, maybe it is a church building or a sanctuary room or some other place in the out-of-doors where the stunning beauty of creation lifts us into the presence of God. This is my invitation today, to think about the places and times, the moments and experiences, when you feel you are in God’s presence. Do you see what we’re getting at? This is more than just thinking about God or learning about God or even praying to God. What we are getting at is being with God. In a childlike way, this is what climbing that tree was for me when I was young. Where is that place for you? When and how do you experience God’s presence? Our reading from scripture this morning wants to take us to the place where we are wrapped in God’s holiness. And, it’s even more than this. The bible wants those moments when our breath is taken away by the wonder of the place to impact all of the other moments of our lives. And so, it’s not just about the places where God is real it’s about the ways our lives are shaped in every place because of our relationship with God. This is why we’ve read from Exodus this morning. It’s the story of Moses and the place is the mountaintop, and the experience of God up there creates a way of life down here and the result is a covenant of faith that shapes the lives of the people. Again, this is our invitation this morning. Where do we experience God and how does that experience connect us to God every day, in every way, and in every place?

Moses was familiar with the mountaintop. He went there often and each time he climbed up he met God. The Old Testament has a way with words, describing the experience as very dramatic. There was fire and smoke. There was shaking and trembling. There was a mysterious cloud that obscured what God looked like but Moses heard a voice that left no doubt who was there. These God-encounters happened numerous times in Moses’ life, and the fact that he stood regularly on holy ground compelled him to follow a path of faith in his life.

As we search for the meaning of the story, we don’t have to go any further. God meets Moses. Moses’ life intersects with God’s presence. This is no small thing. Think about what the bible is saying. The God who created the universe, the God who cast the stars across the night sky, the God who called the world into being is the same God who creates a covenant of faith with Moses and the people. The God of all eternity is also the God of a specific people. Here’s what the bible wants us to understand. The God who is everywhere is the God who is with Moses on the mountain. Let me say it again, this is no small thing the bible is telling us. We can know God in the way God knows us, and it’s this intimate and personal connection that creates a relationship of faith in our lives.

There is a profound link between the story of Moses and the story of Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus went to the mountaintop. This was similar to Moses but it was different. Moses went up there alone. Jesus took the disciples with him. When it comes to Jesus the experience of the mountain connects to what it means to follow him. What happened on the mountain that day was glorious. Let me read some of the story for us: *Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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.” 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!" (Matthew 17: 1-5) Oh yes, there is glory in Christ. We are never more right than when we say Jesus is the Light of the World. But Jesus doesn't teach us to look only at the light in him. Jesus teaches us to live so that there is light in us. Mountain top moments are important because they inspire us to live for God. Jesus wants us to know that God isn't just up there but with us along the way.

I've shared before that my dad is in the late stages of Parkinson's Disease. I visited him on Friday. These aren't easy visits, and I know many of you have had similar experiences with your loved ones. I visited with my dad but we didn't have much of a conversation. My dad doesn't have the capacity for that anymore. So, I was sitting there quietly with him and noticed the sparkling of the sunlight through the trees outside his window. Maybe that's when I remembered the maple tree of my childhood. After a time I decided to say, "So dad, what would you like to talk about?" If you don't know or remember, my dad is a retired pastor, having served the church for 44 years. "Dad, I said, what would you like to talk about?" His words came out slowly but they were clear. "I'd like to talk about our understanding of the incarnation." "What?" I thought to myself. "Where did that come from?" I smiled and said "That's a pretty good subject. What should we think about it?" Well, he tried, but he wasn't able to say anything else and so I finally said, "The incarnation is a good thing to talk about, dad. It's good to think about how God decided to come to through Jesus. It's good to remember that God is always with us, that God comes to be one of us and to love us."

That nursing home room was a far cry from a mountaintop but that's when it hit me. The mountain and God's presence calling us to a covenant relationship in faith, can happen anywhere and everywhere. I don't think my dad was aware but he gave me a gift the other day. He reminded me that our life in faith is far less about us climbing up and much more about God coming down to be incarnate for us through one of us, Jesus our Lord. Experiencing this can happen in a nursing home, or walking through the neighborhood, or serving at the Free Store, or being in a worship service, or bowing our heads for prayer, or participating in a Lenten bible study, or holding a grandchild, or any other number of experiences where we are pulled beyond ourselves and feel connected to God and then compelled to live for God, to be a people of faith.

The mountain is waiting for us this week. And in case you wonder, it probably won't be some high and magnificent place but right where you are. God will find you where you are and in that moment you'll be standing on solid ground.