

I don't know about you but for me the pandemic has opened up some spaces for spending more time with God in contemplative and centering prayer. It is an ancient practice of simply sitting with God and trying to focus on God's goodness and love and simply being in God's presence. The pandemic also helped me discover the connection that I feel to God through nature. In the last several months my husband and I took more walks and hikes together than we did in all of six years of our marriage. For me it was a place of discovery and comfort, for my husband not so much. I took him out of his comfort zone many times in the last few months. Just a few weeks ago we took a short trip to Upstate New York and stayed at Lake Placid where we could explore the beautiful surroundings of lakes and mountains that already looked so colorful. I planned a hike up a mountain about 800 feet high and we were going to have a silent and contemplation time while we were going up. But the hike turned out to be a bit more physically demanding than we expected and I kept talking about it but Josh kept doing "shhh" to me reminding me that we were on silent retreat. I have one of the pictures of how Josh is actively contemplating. Can we have that up? He really does have a sense of humor and we spent our time more laughing and being silly than reflecting. But it was until we got to the place where the summit of the mountain was starting but that required even more physical strength and my husband decided not to go up. But I was determined and climbed up to the top.

They say people feel closer to God when they are on the mountain. Now I know why. I was overwhelmed with the beauty and glory that I saw. I saw other mountain ranges. I saw lakes reflecting afternoon sunlight. I saw trees of every hue of yellow and brown and red. It was awe-inspiring. There was something about the air that felt so thick and thin at the same time and that felt so freeing to me. It was so easy to experience God's presence. I took like a million pictures and slowly Josh and I went back down. Later that night at the hotel I was disappointed with myself that I did not sit longer on the summit of that mountain, that instead I kept taking pictures and did not let God's presence simply penetrate me, I did not let God to know me more and for me to know God deeper. You see I wish I was like Moses who spent so much time in God's presence, he did not even need a mountain. Moses went to a tent to pray and spend time with God. And it is in the tent we meet Moses in today's text of Exodus 33 where Moses was having a conversation with God, a prayer for the Israelites.

You see when we look at the context of this passage that Hannah read for us, we will quickly find that there was a mess, a disaster that happened in the camp. The Israelites betrayed God by creating a Golden calf and worshiping it as their god. Let me remind you that this happened when Moses was up on the mountain praying, and talking with God and receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments, the Law of God for the people especially. When Moses came down and saw such a disaster, he got so angry, he broke the tablets. He could not believe that Aaron would allow the Israelites, who were never his favorite and who were always so negative, to build a god to worship without waiting for Moses to return. Blinded by anger, Moses let another disaster happen. He divided the camp into two groups and let one group kill another. Unfortunately, we are never off the hook with the consequences of our actions.

The lack of trust and patience, immaturity and wanting to control everything angered not only Moses but God as well. God declared that God would not be present with the people anymore as they would continue going to the promised land. God refused to walk alongside them for they were stiff-necked people. Moses could not help but go to the tent and plead God not to leave the Israelites. After all, it was God's project and plan to take the Israelites out to the desert into the promised land. And these were God's people and God needed to take care of them. And God needed to be right with Moses and the people so they can continue their journey. Moses and God went back and forth in their conversation. I imagine Moses wrestling with God, I imagine tears, anxiety, fear, anger. Finally, after a long prayer, God granted Moses what Moses was asking for. God would not abandon the people and God's very presence would go with them. But then Moses with his wish to go deeper and deeper in the prayer, asked God for something really peculiar. Moses asked God to show him God's glory.

And where God invites Moses to go to so God can show him some part of God's glory? Of course a mountain! They might have gone to the same mountain where Josh and I went to. God promised Moses that God's glory would pass Moses and God would declare God's mercy and steadfast love but God would cover him in a cleft of a rock and once the glory is passed God would open Moses up so Moses could see God's back.

God would not show God's face to Moses. Isn't bizzare that we all are sitting here with our faces covered, not showing our faces to each other. Aren't we ourselves in quite a mess, with pandemic and the cases are now on the rise again, with divisions about upcoming elections, with continued struggle with racial justice, with our own personal struggles to be loving and Christ-like in this world. But to me the covering of God was like a sign of mercy and love for Moses and the Israelites. The sign of protection and the reality of limitations that we live in. *To me this is an act of a God who is loving and caring and who is there with us in our chaos and mess. God's covering hand is a sign of how God never gives up on us. God limits Godself in order to be with us out of love.* The Israelites were in a mess, but God chose to show mercy and steadfast love. God did not give up on them.

But Moses had to have this prayer time with God, this important, intense conversation with God where it seemed like the transformation and the change happened for Moses and interestingly enough for God. I mentioned at the beginning contemplation and centering prayer. Father Richard Rohr, Franciscan monk and a founder of the Center of Action and Contemplation believes, quote "When action and contemplation are united, we have beauty, symmetry, and transformation—lives and actions that heal the world by their very presence." It is in prayer that we are transformed into Christ image and it is in prayer that God can first uncover for us our limitations and our messes. A theologian and an author of one of the must books on spiritual formation *Invitation to a Journey* Robert Mulholland puts it,

"The process of being conformed to the image of Christ takes place primarily at the point of our unlikeness to Christ's image. God is present to us in the most destructive aspects of our cultural

captivity. God is involved with us in the most imprisoning bondage of our brokenness. God meets us in those places of our lives that are most alienated from God.”

In the midst of brokenness, in the midst of a mess and disaster, God is with us. Yes we mess up, sometimes big time. And yes there are consequences that naturally happen when we mess up. But it does not mean that God stops loving us. It does not mean God stops walking with us on our journey. It does not mean that God gives up on us. God does not give up on us. The gentle hand of God through Christ Jesus will cover us, will show us the way, will forgive us and make us whole again and again and again. The call for us, my brothers and sisters in Christ is to go to the tent, to the mountain, to wherever place you choose to spend time with God, to bring our messes into God’s hands, to bring our fears and anxieties, to bring what and who we are at the moment and wrestle and cry and speak. The social distancing that we are in could be this very time to practice that and a high time that the world needs us to practice that. Amen