

Matthew 17:1-9
Exodus 24:12-18

At a few points in my life, lighting candles has been deeply important to me as a way of grounding and connecting with God. I have a few very distinct memories from seminary of lighting a candle in a dark room and feeling clarity in a way that was previously elusive. Do you know the feeling? Maybe with a candle or something else? All day long, my mind could be filled with intellectual approaches to theology—Greek and Hebrew, church history and Presbyterian polity—but by the flickering light of a candle in a dark room, God’s presence felt the most real. That flame could be weak and fluttering, tinted with the scent of roses or pine, a tall thin pillar or the last scraps of wax in the bottom of a mason jar, yet whatever it was, the pinprick of flickering light could hold me in certainty of the goodness of the world, and the goodness of God, in a way that nothing else could. Held in the realm of the mysterious, I don’t need a rational explanation for why or how God comes to me in the presence of a candle’s flame. God just does.

Both of the Scripture readings this week take us to a place of mystery that’s a little bit like that. In Matthew, Jesus’s countenance is transformed with radiant light, entrancing the people around him. The moment is deeply significant in the life of Jesus and yet has been open to millions of different interpretations throughout history. We’re easily confused by these moments of mystery. In Exodus, Moses is called up to the mountaintop, but quickly disappears into the clouds. Considering the perspective of the community below, Moses’s position is utterly confusing. He is shrouded in clouds, where a sight like a devouring fire appears to the Israelites, and for forty days he remains there, while the people below are puzzled about the unintelligible interaction happening on this mountaintop.

Narratively, mystery doesn’t reign for too long—for 242 verses after the section of Exodus that we read this morning, God goes on to give Moses incredibly detailed instructions for how the people should live and relate to God and one another. Measurements and instructions for the ark of the covenant make sure no mistakes can be made. Mystery has its limits. And often times we would prefer to run back to the concrete familiarity of instructions, rules, and clear direction rather than dwell in the mystery (and uncertainty) of God. I wonder how we might approach the world differently if we dared to dwell in the mystery, open to the surprising ways that God might turn up around us.

This week we’ll move from the season of Epiphany—all about light and revelation—and into the season of Lent—a time of repentance and yearning for God. On Wednesday, many of us will gather in this space to receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads, a reminder of our finitude and human limitations, but also an invitation to live full and abundant lives, beautifully aware that at least in this form, we will not live forever. Mystery abides. Throughout the season of Lent, we’ll journey through themes of repentance, yearning for the hope of resurrection that we will encounter on Easter. As much as our liturgical calendar invites us to segment these experiences into particular seasons and weeks of

the year, the mystery of God reminds us that all of it—joy and sorrow, peace and violence, uncertainty and confidence—are constantly held side by side in our real lives.

On Thursday of this past week, I was gathered with our Journeys Bible study, a brilliant group of women in our church, as we talked about the role of intercessory prayer—praying with and for one another—in our spiritual lives. Prayer is one of those ordinary mysteries that leaves me with more questions than answers, even as a “professional Christian.” There are days when prayer feels grounding and peaceful, days when we feel like we are shouting into the wind, and days when no words will come no matter how hard we try. Among the Journeys group, several of us, myself included, shared how frightening it can be to ask for the prayers of others, even when we know it can be a transformative and healing process. Prayer is deeply personal and yet also critically communal. It often invites us to bear our souls to one another, knowing that our neighbors likely do not have a concrete way to make things better, and yet it makes a difference to listen and be heard in community and before God. When we share a prayer with a friend, and hear a gentle response of love, or feel the arms of a hug wrapping around us, in some ways it is the divine made visible. Less glorious than Moses on the mountaintop or Jesus’s glowing face, perhaps, but God is viscerally present in the love we share and receive with others.

Even as we discussed what a gift it is to pray with and for one another, we also noted how the vulnerability of prayer often involves looking painful realities straight in the eye. Conversation and prayer with neighbors often makes abstract suffering deeply personal. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by it all. This week we saw tragedy make landfall in East Lansing. Gun violence has become horrifyingly common in every corner of this country, with 5,682 deaths by firearms in 2023 alone. We know that reality. And yet for many of us this shooting felt uniquely painful from the personal stories we have tied up in it. We have friends and colleagues, children and grandchildren, who attend or work at Michigan State. These are no longer far off stories of other communities navigating a nightmare, but our neighbors and our friends. So we pray, trusting that in the mystery of it all God will be present with compassion and comfort. But we also act, calling legislators and campaigning for efforts to build more protections and safety into our nationwide relationship with firearms. This week some of us have jumped straight to political organizing, and some have needed time to process and grieve the reality of the moment. Some have felt encouraged by prayer and hymns of comfort—some have felt frustrated that action and change are too far off.

I believe God is here as we question what to do. Like the Israelites looking up at the top of Mt. Sinai shrouded in clouds, we might feel perplexed and alone in the midst of it all. The mystery of God can be frustrating and confusing—how long, O Lord, must these atrocities continue? How long will we campaign for safer legislation but see little to no change? How long will our children be in fear? How long must we bear pain in our souls and have sorrow in our hearts all day long? These are ancient questions—the last from Psalm 13, as people throughout time and space have come to God with anger and confusion, wondering how and why suffering continues. But throughout history, many of those supplications have also been backed up with action, prophetic moves to shift entire cultures back to paths of righteousness and justice.

I do not have an easy solution. I grieve the ongoing reality of gun violence, and I encourage you to check out the list of action steps our gun violence prevention group has put together. It’s all both systemic and *deeply* personal. This week in conversation with my friend Rev. Neil Myer, a colleague who leads the UKirk college ministry group at Michigan State, I’ve been reminded of the importance of sharing our stories and praying together, even as we also organize for social change. For Neil, the week has involved a whole different level of prayer, counseling, and recovery. He needs action and change, but also needs the interpersonal connection of love and prayer.

Caught in the Mystery

Sunday, February 19, 2023
Transfiguration of the Lord
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

Perhaps the mystery of God makes room for that nuance—that taking time to pray, mourn, and lament does not negate our activism, but gives it more strength. Showing up in community, and across communities—Wolverines sharing love with Spartans—we encounter the mystery and hope of God in transformative ways.

I still have many questions about the ordinary mystery of prayer, but I am grateful for friends who pray when I cannot find the words. I have even more questions about the mystery of the transfiguration—and if you were hoping for a sermon that would elucidate that, I’m sorry to disappoint! Still, this week I have been dwelling in mystery—amidst the pain and fear, amidst the “what’s next” and “how do we move forward,” amidst the stories, anger, and confusion. Amidst it all, a still small voice reminds us that God is present and active on the way. We share our stories, we share our prayers, and we share our fears, and in the same way I can’t explain why a candle brings me so much comfort, God shows up in the midst of the unanswered questions.

Friends, in a few minutes we’ll be celebrating a baptism. Baptisms are their own glorious mountaintop moment, and they are also a place of ordinary mystery where the divine is made visible. In a few moments, we’ll gather around baby Jack and affirm that he is loved and chosen by God, long before he can do anything to “earn” or “deserve” the love of God. We’ll gather around Jack to testify to that mystery, and to commit to share the love of Christ with him and his family whenever we can. When the world is painful, when we feel lonely or despondent, God meets us in these moments to shine a light of hope—mysterious as it may be.

So in the midst of the ordinary, we light a candle, or we encounter a young child, and we are transfigured, called to live and be transformed by the reality of who God is and how God’s love expands far beyond the rational boxes of our minds. When fear traps us in place, the light of God breaks in and tugs us toward something new. Sometimes the abundant grace we see for a one-year-old is the mysterious window we need to feel it for ourselves too.

Thanks be to God.