

Imagine

Proper 23A; October 15, 2023; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106: 1-6, 19-23;

Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

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In the name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen.

You probably remember a well-known hit song from the early 2000's by the Christian rock band MercyMe called "I can only imagine." Lead singer and songwriter Bart Millard was inspired to write this song by his experience of his father's death; its lyrics imagine, as the title says, what it might be like to go to Heaven and meet Jesus. *"Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you, Jesus, or in awe of you be still? Will I stand in your presence, or to my knees will I fall? Will I sing hallelujah? Will I be able to speak at all? I can only imagine."* I've always thought those were powerful questions- because we don't know, do we? We

may believe that we'll be so glad to see God that our joy and gratitude will just bubble up in us and make our souls and our bodies dance, but we could also be so completely overcome with awe and wonder that we can't even stand up. We might fall to the ground and even feel we need to hide our faces from the radiance of God's presence- as did Peter and James and John on the mountain when they were overcome by Jesus' transfigured glory. Until we experience this fullness of God for ourselves, all we really can do is try to imagine what we might say or how we might react.

And yet, it is common practice for us to hear the stories of scripture and feel a little superior to the characters in these stories-as if we're so certain that we would be more persistent in the face of hardships, more obedient to God's commands, more faithful to what is being asked of us. Peter is the usual victim of this, of course- we wouldn't ask Jesus to tell us to walk on the

water towards him and then fall down because we were afraid of the storm, would we? Or deny Jesus three times in a row after promising we would never do such a thing- of course we wouldn't! And here in this season of ordinary time where we are immersed, week after week, in what is basically a travel log of the Israelites and their wilderness wanderings, we've been continually amazed at how easily all God's goodness and providence towards them slipped from their minds. "But God promised he would always be their God, and he showed them both power and mercy in so many different ways!" I can just hear us thinking. "How could they possibly forget?"

It is so easy to think we would do it differently. But when it comes to anything worthwhile in the spiritual life, we should know better- that we too will not always remember what we were taught even though we promised that we would. The Israelites are so good at reminding us that it takes constant effort, constant vigilance against the

nagging doubts that creep in no matter what we do- to believe that all God's promises will be true for us also, especially in those challenging times when we too struggle to be in intimate relationship with a God we cannot see or touch. We should be charitable enough to at least sympathize with their demand for Aaron to create something in which God's presence would reside, something that could be a physical part of their worship experience. They had become accustomed to how the temples of the many gods the Egyptians worshipped were all around them and that the rituals associated with these temples were very evident. And they were familiar with the pillar of fire, a clear manifestation of God's presence, going before them in their travel and easily visible to them when they camped each night. They could see "that the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain of Sinai"- AND they knew that Moses- their leader, their safe space, the one whom they trusted to be the messenger between the

Holy and themselves- *had been gone up on that mountain for what felt like a very, very long time.* It's really no surprise that they craved from Aaron the same thing that Moses had always given them: *reassurance that God was somehow still present with them and caring for them.* They longed for something they could see and touch- like water gushing from a rock in the desert wilderness- that meant the Holy One was still acting on their behalf and would go before them as had been promised.

Shouldn't they have remembered everything they had already known of the goodness and loving-kindness of God: the Passover which spared them and created a ritual to remember this moment for always, their deliverance at the Red Sea, the quails and manna and water that sustained them in the wilderness? *Probably.* Hadn't they recently heard in the proclamation of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought

you out of the land of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before me... AND you shall not make for yourself an idol that you will bow down to or serve?" ***Absolutely***. Was the golden calf incident a really bad decision all the way around? ***Without a doubt***. And...as we talked about two weeks ago- aren't they human like us, after all? Don't we also make choices that lead us further away from God when our longing is really to be closer, choices that turn us towards something-***anything***- that serves as a substitute when we feel as if we've been left alone in the wilderness for too long? Don't we, like the wedding guests in today's parable, ignore the invitation to dine at the most extravagant, most generous banquet imaginable as if we have better things to do- this being of course an allusion to the heavenly banquet? ***How often do we forget what we have already been given- forget to really live as if the whole banquet is meant to be ours?***

Every day, we are tempted to bow down to shiny fake gods that are worldly and not heavenly, those golden calves that are right in front of us- the ones that promise us everything yet demand nothing from us that calls us to struggle towards what is true and good. Sometimes we sacrifice every part of our lives on the altars of these fake gods- on ‘idols’ like wealth, or power, or popularity, or addiction- that are not and can never be a substitute for the power of the living God within us. We forget, just like the Israelites, that even when we cannot see God as clearly as we long to or God feels far away or when the thought of being in God’s presence feels huge and overwhelming *that God sticks with us, is ever-present to us, that God’s generosity and abundance and love is ours to claim and to share.* “Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us,” says today’s Collect, “so we may continually be given to good works.” And: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good”, says the

psalmist. “His mercy endures forever. Glad are they who act with justice and do what is right!”

The kingdom-building life- our efforts to be God’s people in this and every age- will always bring us to places of uncertainty and struggle where our faithfulness is sorely tested. It will always be a challenge to keep before us those things that are true, honorable, just, commendable, as the apostle Paul speaks of in today’s epistle- and he should know, writing this letter as he was chained in a Roman prison, wondering if he would be sentenced to death for the gospel truth he proclaimed, yet sending a message of profound hope to a world in turmoil- *as ours is right now*. Our longing is the same as Paul’s: to speak hope and the promise of restoration in ways our world will see and understand when darkness threatens to overcome us, when stories of violence and humankind’s utter cruelty to one another breaks our hearts open, as they are right now with the images of Israel’s terrible

suffering. We too must learn from both the mistakes and the wisdom of those who came before us to strengthen us for the work of standing up against injustice, to *live* as if we are surrounded by a love far bigger than ourselves, a love that is *nearer* than we can possibly imagine- a love grounded on the sovereign power of God that provides us with all we need. From the hymn we sang just before our gospel comes the words I think we need the most today:

*Mortal pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust;
though with care and toil we build them,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower. Amen.*