

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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Entering the Clouds
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Faster than a speeding bullet.
More powerful than a locomotive.
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Look! Up in the sky!
It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman!

Yes, it's Superman - strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman - who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights the never ending battle for *Truth, Justice and the American Way*.

Heroes of the 1950's. Born in 1951, there's a good chance I was in front of the television when the series began in 1952, running until late 1957. Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olson, Perry White – and of course, Superman. I wanted to be Superman. I wanted to jump into a telephone booth and come out flying, fighting for truth, justice, and the American Way.

I don't know if it was just me, usually it's not, but my heroes were like that. I was too young to embrace the Pattons, MacArthurs, Trumans, Churchills... it was not probably until the 60's when Martin Luther King came onto the national stage that I felt as though I was living in the presence of a hero. In fact, to this day, within my lifetime – given the chance, he is the one I would most likely drop all that I was doing to follow. Given the chance...

Maybe one reason I/we reach out to the silver screen that *is* bigger than life for inspiration and big ideals is that too few world figures seem to embody those things today. We live in a time, or for a time, when – yes, there are great people, but heroes: well, you decide, but according to onelook.com, the definition of hero includes:

- (classical mythology) a being of great strength and courage celebrated for bold exploits; often the offspring of a mortal and a god
- someone distinguished by exceptional courage and nobility and strength
- someone who fights for a cause

and, of course...

- a large sandwich made of a long crusty roll split lengthwise and filled with meats and cheese (and tomato and onion and lettuce and condiments); different names are used in different sections of the United States

Don't get me wrong, there have been many people who have been role models for me and a few exceptional mentors, but heroes?

Yet, as I study the Old Testament more, as I learn better about the times and the layers and complexities of the conflicts and what drove them, I realize that I am reading about an historical period, an epoch, during which heroes really did exist.

Aside from the mythology of beings who were part human and part God, there are numerous examples of how God interjected God's self into the lives of others and the things of which individuals accomplished in God's name.

Impressive names and accomplishments - even today. The impact of men and women like Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Deborah, Saul, David, Solomon, and others during their own times had to be enormous. These were real-life backgrounds of continental dimensions, sets with no directors against which history in heroic terms unfolded and principal characters emerged.

In the case of the Old Testament writings, we enter a time some 3400 years ago and moving forward with the Hebrews, seeking meaning to life from within a religious dimension. Big questions were on the minds of these nomadic / "still somewhat barbarian" peoples as they broke into the Canaanite civilization around 1400 BCE. Through their leaders, their heroes, they had come to know some of the answers to the big questions: Who are we? What is our place in this world of wonder and unfathomed mystery? And history was about to be changed forever...

The world and the history of the times that was passed on to us – reveals an epic drama on scale and proportion of nothing less than God and God's people and those in the way. What a time of passion, upheaval, and heart. And, it is out of the abundance of those hearts and souls that the truth mouth speaks and the pen records.

From the oral, poetic tradition it was we eventually began to receive the texts written well after the Canaanite conquest. Up until then it was the stories of folklore and tradition, growing with each telling: firing the heart with zeal and a nationalism of faith.

This morning's readings precede the time of the Canaanite conquest, but not by much. In these scriptures, we gain a glimpse into the life of a wandering people, and their relationship to God.

In the familiar story of Moses going up the mountain to receive the law, this morning I would like to spend a few minutes speaking about the ancient practice of being in God's presence and the parallelism of the Matthean texts that follow. Both take place on a mountain top (high place); both involve the central figures – Moses and Jesus taking with them companions, and both involve a theophany: a visible, but not necessarily material encounter with God.

For a moment, let's try to walk in the shoes Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Hur; Jesus, Peter, James, and John. Suspend, if you will, the normal reliable devices of our lives: timepieces, natural physical order, even to a degree – safety, and enter into the cloud of God's presence, the Shekinah, in a fully invested way. Nothing but you and God.

Any visceral reactions to the idea, such as wanting to run?

It seems to me that, generally speaking, these men and women of earlier faithful times were much more familiar with the total abandonment of themselves to the rule of God; less reliant on sight and sound in any physical way; more in tune with the universal presence of God in ways beyond what we might today describe as quantum. They did not just observe the phenomenon of what this type of faith produced – they became the phenomenon.

Moses and Jesus, Elijah and Elisha – somehow entered the state of God's presence through a portal most of us have not yet even been able to consider. They were able to let go of everything - to be other than as they appeared to be – and not be lost in the process.

In ancient Hebrew "to see," poetically refers to being in the presence of God. Any reference to the senses in such a state would always refer to *knowing God* in that presence – in that "cloud."

Somewhere in the 14th Century, an English monk penned a work called "The Cloud of Unknowing." It is a classic contemplative work on the deep mysteries of faith, a sublime work on what it is that separates God from humanity.

Sr. Catherine Wybourne comments on the book in a January 22 article in NewStatesman magazine. A Benedictine nun, Catherine begins her article in this way:

Becoming a Benedictine takes a lifetime. The idea of continual becoming — in religious terms continual conversion — is so fundamental that it is even the subject of one of our vows, *conversatio morum*, usually translated as "conversion of life". I think it was this that first attracted me to the monastic way of life.

Later in the piece, she refers to the book The Cloud of Unknowing:

I read Walter Hilton and *The Cloud of Unknowing* and suddenly, it all began to make sense. God stopped being a theoretical construct and became a deeply mysterious, compelling being whom it was possible to know, but not in the way I had previously attempted. "By love may [God] be gotten and holden, but by thought never."

In this process of becoming who it is God has called us to be, it seems the prerequisite is a fair amount of "unknowing" and entering into the presence of God in a way that has no limitations.

As I read and reflected on this morning's readings, in the lengthening shadows of the approaching Lent, I was reminded of just how far I still had to go in this abandonment of myself to God.

Simultaneously, I was reminded that even thoughts like those are limiting, part of the typical way of going about living, with self-imposed restrictions on how or where faith might carry me.

And I do think it is faith that carries us to a place beyond faith, where faith is shed like boosters on a rocket, finally settin us free in some way we have yet to know.

Somehow, this is what I think these passages reflect: deeply theophanic ways of encountering God – and not leaving, but returning to others to help guide them. Moses, Jesus – both returned from their mountaintop theophanies to "love" others toward God."

In the past, I have said that the time of the prophets culminated in the life and teachings of Jesus. It may be true that the *heroic sense of being* culminated in him as well. Today's prophets and those who behave heroically today are, perhaps, those who enter into the place of Jesus, as he did – and in so doing – come to know what the 14th Century monk said: "By love may God be gotten, but by thought never."

If that is true, than it seems the best way to enter into that cloud, the Shikinah, is through the portal of love and service.

After all, the Bible tells us so.

Amen.