“Looking Up, and Within”

2 Kings 2:1-12 Psalm 50:1-6 Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday, Year B, February 14, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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I am a beekeeper. Western honey bee. Carniolans, Apis mellifera carnica, using the A-Z hive system. Did you get all that? I’ll say it again.

I am a beekeeper. Western honey bee. Carniolans, Apis mellifera carnica, using the A-Z hive system. I’m a hobby beekeeper and have discovered that the more I learn, the more I realize there’s so much I don’t know. As I learn, I become more able to recognize mistakes I’ve been making all this time; it’s very humbling. But I keep on this path, and along the way spiritual truths are revealed that I likely would’ve missed otherwise. Bee keeping, as a spiritual discipline, is compelling in ways that resonate with me.

When I said, “I am a beekeeper,” most of you probably knew what I meant. Maybe you pictured someone in white coveralls with a veil on their hat, maybe using a smoker tool to calm the bees while the hive is inspected. Perhaps you’ve heard of swarm catchers, people who come over to catch a swarm of bees that need removed. “Beekeeper” is a fairly familiar term. For centuries, beekeepers have collected honey, beeswax, and other hive products.

I also said “Western honey bee,” because there are different varieties or subspecies of pollinators. Honey bees are specific in the insect world, because not all bees collect honey. By saying, Western honey bees, or European honey bees, we are even more specific. But, so you didn’t automatically think I was talking about Italian honey bees, which are the most popular, I also made sure to mention my focus is on Carniolans. Those are the honey bees that originally came from Carniola, which is now Slovenia.

I did mention Slovenia because my hive boxes are A-Z hives, named for Alberti and Žnideršič, the originators of this A-Z style of hive box which is widely used throughout Slovenia. My hives are actually made in Slovenia and shipped over. There are many qualities of this hive system that I won’t mention now, but I want us to notice that in my introduction there is a flow.

I am a beekeeper. My opening words start out broad, with a description most people can resonate with, but then with each added term or phrase, the details hone down and become more and more specific. They get the point where only beekeepers appreciate the subtleties, while everyone else wouldn’t have a frame of reference to understand what I’m actually talking about, let alone have a conversation about it, such as asking, “Are your Slovenian, A-Z Hives two chambers or three?” (They’re the two chamber design).

Welcome to this morning’s scriptures as they start out with broad visions that include many, but as the biblical narratives move along, the vision God offers gains intensity while it also becomes more focused. Along the way there is a mix of amazement and confusion; and both conversations, and not knowing what one is saying. Those who have nurtured a capacity to perceive are brought along, step by step, even though they may not understand what is happening at the time, but eventually, someday, things fall into place as they gain perspective based on God’s actions in the world.

In the story of Elijah passing on prophetic power to Elisha, “a chariot of fire and horses of fire” separate the two of them and “Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” It’s a permanent deal; Elisha rips his clothing to symbolically indicate a tragedy, a parting, like a death in his life that will forever affect him. We tend to equate heaven with “up” so for Elijah to “ascend” fits our preconceived notions, We’d rather have him go up than down in the three-tiered universe Christianity has so long promoted, with heaven up there, Earth right here, and hell below, the underworld. But like this story shows, even those separations are not all that clean, and in fact, heaven and Earth have spiritual connections that affect the material world.

The Psalmist is similar as God the LORD, God Almighty, speaks and summons the Earth continually. More divine fire is mentioned, more wind, metaphors expressing divine power. The heavens are above the earth, declaring God’s righteousness, but it doesn’t say this in physical, geographic terms. It could be stages of conscious awareness.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain and they are apart from everyone else, by themselves; again, on another level. Jesus gets all shiny, dazzling, divine radiance all around, and even dead people show up: an image of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ. Peter speaks from his limited frame of reference, the disciples are terrified, and a cloud overshadows them as God’s voice speaks. Theophany; the divine revealed to humankind, a manifestation of the spiritual on Earth.

As a beekeeper, when inspecting, or what I call, making a visitation to a hive, one of the things I notice are drone cells in the brood chamber where the Queen Mother lays her eggs. There’s some amazing biology involved as the Queen Mother decides whether to fertilize each egg, or not, but basically, drones are the boys. Most honey bees are female, the Queen Mother being the largest, all the others are female, except the drones, who’s sole purpose in life is to mate with a Queen, and after a rapturous mid-air blissful moment, falls to the ground dead. Those that don’t succeed in their sole purpose are kicked out permanently from the hive in the fall so they don’t exhaust winter honey supplies.

Drones are pretty obvious when you look at a frame filled with bees. They are somewhat larger, but what really shows are their eyes. Their eyes are bigger than the eyes of the females, and they are positioned on the top of their head, rather than the side. This way, as they fly around outside, they are constantly looking up, above them, scanning the pheromone trails for a mating Queen. When they spot her up above, they rise up for a mid-air encounter that fulfills their destiny.

Western culture is kind of like those drones. Plato started it, the ancient Greek philosopher who basically said the heavenly, celestial realms are of more importance than Earthly realms of the flesh. That’s why a “Platonic relationship” lacks physical contact. He said humans are unique in the animal world because we are upward gazers, we have the spiritual capacity to look up, to connect with the divine. This is partly why biblical texts and Christian history are so focused on heaven being above us, as if that’s better. Most of the time we assume there is separation, that heaven is veiled and God’s presence is hidden.

This morning’s scriptures seem to go along with this, ascending with fiery chariots and horses, the heavens declaring God’s righteousness, and a theophany with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and God’s voice speaking, all on a mountaintop, up high, away from everyone else. But there’s also another dynamic at work that 1) challenges our three-tiered universe approach, 2) questions Plato’s philosophical underpinnings of Western culture, and

3) reminds us of the importance of the Incarnation, of God’s Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Deeper spiritual truth is revealed in the biblical message that ‘God with us’ (Epiphany) is the grace-filled framework of Reality, God living in us as our life; we are hidden with Christ in God, like the disciples enveloped in the cloud, a cloud of unknowing as we shed our assumptions, self-made identities, and limiting thoughts.

In Psalm 50, the LORD is speaking from Zion, which in some ways can mean Jerusalem, but in a more specific sense, it means God’s abode, where God dwells; this is the source of beauty itself, which is good, and relational. From God’s abode, Zion, God calls to the heavens and the earth, to both.

On the mountain with Jesus, in the midst of the cloud God’s voice speaks, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” Relational language, based in love, calling to the heavens and the earth, to both, but specifically to the three disciples who are frightened, confused, and talking even though they don’t know what they are saying. “Be silent” we hear Elisha tell the other prophets when something is too big to handle, and that seems the case with Peter, James, and John because they are told to listen, listen to Jesus, listen to Love.

That image of a cloud enveloping them is also relational as God surrounds them, filling every breath in mysterious presence. Suddenly, they look around and it’s only Jesus with them, and it seems their fears have subsided as they go back down the mountain. This is a tremendous view of the Incarnation, of God with us; that we don’t have to live in fear, that higher planes of Consciousness are calling to us, lifting us up, drawing us forward. But we are also empowered to experience the union of spirit and matter in our own lives, on Earth, which is hallowed and sacred ground.

God’s beauty continues to call, God’s goodness holds the fullness of life in love, and we are called to open ourselves in trust, receiving the capacity of spiritual perception and responding in glory and praise, but mostly, by living in Love.

As we celebrate God with us on this final Sunday of Epiphany, we give thanks as we journey with Jesus into the depths of our own hearts so we may live in the beauty of God’s radiant presence as heaven and Earth, both, shine forth in our soul. Thanks be to God for calling through the clouds, giving new life, renewing our spirit, transforming our mind, and filling our heart as we live in joy and praise. Amen.