

Pentecost Vigil

When have you had your most profound experience of the presence of God? For many people it was the birth of their child. For others it was an experience of nature - a sunset, a lake, or a mountain. For others it may have been the answer to a prayer, the return to good health, or a near experience of death from which they escaped. In many cases, when people talk about their most profound experience of God, it was an occasion of peace, unity, and gratitude. Rarely do people name an experience that ends in fear. In fact, if something bad happens - if parents lose a child, if someone dies in a fire, or if a tornado destroys all that a family owns - some people interpret the event not as the presence of God, but the absence of God. Frequently someone will ask, "Where was God? How could a loving God allow this to happen?" In some cases, people lose their faith because they cannot reconcile bad news with God's presence.

Yet, the bible sometimes tells of God frightening people. For example, for the first reading of this Pentecost Vigil, we hear about Mount Sinai. There, God told Moses to remind the people of all that God had done to help them escape Egypt. Hearing this, the people agree to do whatever God wants. But then, "On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled." It had to be frightening. But Moses did not turn away. He brought the people right up to the foot of the mountain so that they could meet this God. "Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The trumpet blast grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking, and God answering him with thunder." Then the Book of Exodus says, the Lord "summoned Moses to the top of the mountain."

Now, I ask you, if you were Moses, would you go up there? I would have been scared, not comforted by the presence of this God.

We hear this story on the Vigil of Pentecost because it foreshadows the coming of the Holy Spirit in the upper room. In the Old Testament the chosen people had their own feast of Pentecost to celebrate the giving of the commandments on Mount Sinai. The Jewish people of our own day still observe Pentecost as the anniversary of God's conversation with Moses. It was on that Jewish feast of Pentecost when the disciples were in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus. As Moses had gone up a mountain, so they entered an upper room. As Moses heard trumpet blasts and saw fire, so the disciples heard a loud noise and saw tongues as of fire. Moses received God's commandments, and the disciples received the Holy Spirit. Both events were surely frightening. There are times when encountering God is not a pleasant experience.

God may appear to us not only in the most peaceful times, but in the scariest times. Just because there is bad news doesn't mean that God is absent. It may mean that God is mysterious, and God may be assigning us a task we at first find unpleasant. Whenever we experience God, we can be assured that God loves us, even if we walk away from the encounter not peaceful but scared.