

CAVE MEN

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 28:1-10

I have always contended that as preacher here at First Presbyterian, I have the best seat in the house. Standing here, on the chancel, affords me a perfect, unobstructed view of our sanctuary's two magnificent stained-glass windows. These windows are Tiffany-esque. They were not made by the famous Tiffany company but were created in the same style. In some places on these windows, you will even find two layers of painted glass which creates a 3D effect.

On my right, on the east side of the sanctuary, you will find the Easter window with its depiction of the angel sitting on the stone next to the empty tomb. To my left is the Transfiguration window with its image of Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah.

Until this week, I had never considered that there was any connection between these two windows other than the obvious fact that they both represent key moments in the Christian story—Jesus' Transfiguration and Jesus' Easter Resurrection. But this week, I've been thinking about Easter in light of COVID-19. And I've discovered another way these two windows relate to one another—and that is caves. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—we can call them cave men because they each had a life-defining experience in a cave.

This week, I've been thinking about caves as a metaphor for our lives under COVID-19. We have all retreated to our own personal caves as a means of practicing social distancing, of maintaining a physical distance from other people so as to slow the spread of this deadly and highly contagious virus. For most of us, our caves are pretty comfortable. It's not prison. But our self-imposed quarantine is certainly different from what we are used to. Today—Easter—we would expect to be gathered together in this sanctuary, bathed in the glow of these beautiful windows, singing the hymns of our faith and giving thanks to God. But we are not. I am speaking to you at your home, in your cave.

Jesus' transfiguration is described to us in the gospels. Jesus leads three disciples up a mountain to pray. At the top of the mountain, Jesus is transfigured—he is changed. *His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.* And then suddenly, standing with him are Moses and Elijah. They are conversing.

Our Transfiguration window portrays Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Moses and Elijah are two of the great heroes of the Old Testament. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Elijah was a prophet of the northern Kingdom who defended the worship of the Hebrew God against the incursion of worship of the Canaanite God Baal.

When Moses helped the people escape Egypt, they lived in the wilderness for many years. During this time, God communicated with the people through Moses. God was just a voice and Moses wanted to see God. Moses needed to see what he was dealing with. He could not, in confidence, ask his people to obey him if he wasn't convinced that this "god" was what he claimed to be. Moses asks to see God's *glory*. And God agrees stipulating that Moses cannot see God's face because God says, *for no one shall see me and live.* God instructs Moses to stand in a cave on the mountain. As God's glory passes by, God will cover Moses with his hand to shield him. Then, as God is headed away, Moses will be able to see God's back from the cave, but God's face will not be seen.

The second figure in the window, Elijah, is recognized as one of the great prophets of ancient Israel. On Thursday of this week, as Jews celebrated Passover with a Seder meal, they set an extra cup out for Elijah. Elijah served God in the ninth century BC during the reign of King Ahab. Under King Ahab, the Israelites' worship of the God Baal increased. This was due in part to Ahab having married the Phoenician princess Jezebel, herself a priestess of Baal.

Elijah preached vehemently against the worship of Baal which put him at odds with the queen and the king. This leads to the great showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in the contest on Mount Carmel—a contest to determine whose god could bring fire. When Elijah wins, he has the priests of Baal executed. In retribution, Jezebel orders Elijah's death and he is forced to flee.

Certain that all is lost, Elijah runs as far as he can into the wilderness and lays down under a tree to die. But God sends an angel with bread and water for Elijah which provides him the strength to continue on. He travels some more until he comes to a cave where he spends the night. The voice of God comes to Elijah in the cave and asks what he is doing there. Elijah explains that he has 'caved to the pressure.' All is lost. He is the last of the prophets and now Jezebel's people intend to kill him.

God orders Elijah to go out of the cave and stand on the mountainside. Elijah does so and a great wind blows up, but God is not in the wind. After the wind, there is an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. Then there is fire, but God is not in the fire either. And then there is a sound of sheer silence. And that is God. God gives Elijah instruction to go back to work as a prophet and he obeys.

In our gospel reading for today, we encounter the familiar passage of Jesus in a cave. This cave is a tomb cut into the rock for the purpose of burial. After his arrest and trial, Jesus was executed by crucifixion. His body was placed into this tomb. The tomb was sealed with a large stone.

When the Sabbath had passed, two women—Mary Magdalene and another woman also named Mary—go to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. When they arrive, the ground shakes. An angel of the Lord pushes the stone from the entrance and then sits on it. The angel looks like lightning and his clothes are white like snow. The guards at the tomb are paralyzed with fear. The angel speaks to the Marys saying, *Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has been raised from the dead, he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.*

In Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—three figures present at the Transfiguration—we find three people who had transformative experiences within caves. Each one of them experiences God's glory. Moses witnesses God directly which provides him the courage to continue leading his people to the Promised Land. Elijah discovers that God's power is not in wind or earthquake or fire, but in God's voice.

That voice speaks to Elijah and supplies him the courage to continue his work as a prophet. Jesus' dead body is placed in a cave but God resurrects him to life.

At the first Easter, Jesus' disciples and followers were in caves as well—caves of grief and despair that their Lord was dead. The women go to the tomb to see for themselves. The rest of the disciples remain trapped in their own caves of fear unable to escape. But the angel sends the women back to the disciples with the message that Jesus has been raised. But why the disciples? At the end, hadn't they failed Jesus miserably? They denied him; they abandoned him; they ran for their own lives. Were they worthy to be disciples? No, they were not. But God sends the sinners, the failures, the lost, the scared, the weak with the promise of renewal. This renewal is salvation.

In the great covenant that God makes with Abraham, and in the many ratifications of that covenant since, God promises to stay with us always, to watch over us, to bring us salvation. Time after time, when we have been unfaithful and God should have kicked us to the curb, God sticks with us. God upholds that covenant. This covenant finds its ultimate expression at Easter. God comes to us as one of us. Tragically, in an act of unfaithfulness, we kill God. But he does not stay dead. He does not leave us. Because of the eternal promise of the covenant, our God embraces us.

The promise of Easter is that no matter why we enter our cave, God will be with us. We may go in discouraged like Moses, or frightened like Elijah, or even dead like Jesus, but God will stay with us. We will experience God's glory and be given new direction, new strength, and new life to live as God's holy people.

On this Easter Sunday, we are all cave women and cave men. And we need to stay that way until the virus has cleared. When we do emerge from our caves, our God will be with us and we shall have new life. Amen.