

Sermon for Sunday, February 26, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

A few years ago,
I went to see a play
called “The Squeegee Man.”
It was part of a festival for new writers, people hoping to win a prize
that would see them have their play produced
by a professional theater company.
It was set in New York;
a journalist looks out of her window
and sees a squeegee man, one of those guys
who stand at the traffic light
and offer to wash your windscreen
for a couple of bucks.
And each time she looks out of her window,
she comes up with a new idea for a newspaper story.
Over a period of months
her career takes off,
all inspired
by the squeegee man. And her stories
transform
other people’s lives.

And then one day, she’s looking out the window,
and thinks,
why not interview the squeegee man
himself?

And so she goes downstairs, and begins to talk to him.
And as she talks
— and he tries to avoid answering her questions — it emerges that she has seen him do
something,
or at least she thinks she has,
that seems kind of weird.
Because one day
there was a mother with a baby on the sidewalk,
and a guy pulled up in a car, pulled out a gun, and shot at them. Close range, no chance
of missing.

But the squeegee man
put out his hand
between the gun and the mother,
and somehow
stopped the bullets.
Or at least,
there was no blood, no screaming,
the car pulled away again
and the mother and baby
went on their way.

The journalist
tries to ask the squeegee man about it. He says he's not Superman.
So what is he?

And as the play continues
it emerges, somehow,
that the squeegee man is in fact
God,
and for whatever reason
he's decided to come spend some time on the streets of New York
washing windcreens.

And of course
the journalist
finds it all a little hard to take.
God, here, on her street?
Washing windcreens?

Because like many of us,
while she's spent her life kind of believing that God is real,
she's not entirely sure, not entirely convinced.
Yes, she believes in God,
but not the kind of God
you might actually meet.
And so, when she does actually meet God,
her whole framework of faith
is thrown into chaos.
Does she believe
or doesn't she?

Is this God
 or just a hallucination?
 Is belief
 a matter of seeing, of proof,
 or something else?
 And just because this guy says he's God, and has stopped a couple of bullets,
 is it really true?

And then she asks the questions that are even harder.
 If this is God,
 why
 did he only just show up now?
 What about the other times
 when she prayed with all her heart and soul and mind and strength,
 and there was no answer, what about then?
 Why does God show up now, when her life is pretty much okay, why now, and not when
 she was five years old and her father left, and she thought it was all her fault; why not
 when she was eleven
 and her mother swallowed a bottle of pills
 and she was left, alone, totally alone.
 Where was God when she needed him?

It's a question
 that we all ask
 one time or another. When things are tough, why doesn't God just show up,
 there on the sidewalk like the squeegee man,
 or even better, intervening in our lives to stop the things that go wrong?

Scripture doesn't give any easy answers to this. What it does give us, though,
 is some stories about time
 when God did show up. And when God shows up in Scripture, it's usually just as
 unexpected
 as the squeegee man.
 But the similarity ends there. Because when God shows up
 in Scripture
 it's not just a friendly cross between Superman and Touched by an Angel.
 When God shows up,
 it's usually an event
 that has the participants
 ducking for cover.

We heard in our readings today
about two times
when God showed up.
The first was with Moses.

Moses
and the Israelites
were wandering around in the wilderness. They'd escaped from Egypt
but hadn't yet made it
to the promised land.
And then one day, Moses received a summons, a summons from God
to go up Mount Sinai
where God would give him the law.
So Moses did what he was told — because a summons from God
is one thing
you don't miss. This meeting was so crucial, so dangerous, that he gathered the leaders
of the people around him, the elders, and gave them instructions. And then went up, with
just his protegee Joshua, and even he as left behind near the peak, so that just Moses went
alone
to meet with God.
And when he reached the top, a cloud covered the mountain. And Moses waited there six
days, and only on the seventh
did God speak with him. And to the people watching down below
it looked like Moses
had been consumed by a devouring fire.
That was the closest they could get
to describing what this meeting with God
was like.
And Moses stayed there forty days and nights
before he came down.

And when Jesus went up the mountain to meet with God
it was more like it had been for Moses
than for the journalist meeting the squeegee man.
It was time, time for Jesus to begin
his final journey
towards Jerusalem.
And so he took three of his closest friends,
and they went up

onto a high mountain. And there, suddenly, everything was dazzling white, and Jesus seemed to be speaking with two extra people, and then a cloud dropped over it all

and the voice of God spoke:

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”

The disciples were terrified: the glory of God was a terrifying thing to see.

And when they came down,

Jesus told them

to tell no one.

Moses on the mountain; the disciples on the mountain - both times they knew for certain

beyond any shade of doubt

that God was real. That God was powerful. That God could intervene in this world of ours.

It's still something we yearn for, deep down inside. To meet God, literally, physically, in a way

that we will have proof, finally,

that all this faith thing is worth it, that it's actually true.

But for most of us

all we get

is the answer

that the journalist got

in the play.

When she asked that final question, when all the rage and anger and disappointment and abandonment had spilled out of her,

“God, where were you???”

what the squeegee man said was,

“I was with you. I was with you

all the time.”

I was with you all the time.

Not the dramatic appearance that Moses saw, that Jesus saw. Just a quiet, pretty much undetectable presence.

But you know, that was actually how it was for Moses, and even for Jesus, most of the time.

When Moses stood trembling in front of Pharaoh,

when the people of Israel
started rebelling and muttering against him,
when they turned to false gods and made golden idols,
there was no dramatic intervention by God.
Just God present, working quietly in and through Moses.

And even Jesus. He might have been convinced
that he was on a mission from God
but there were times of terrible doubt,
out in the wilderness, tested by Satan,
exhausted, praying alone
after the feeding of the five thousand, hanging desolate
on the cross.

We tend to assume
that it was easy for him. He got the face to face meeting, he got the absolute certainty.
But all that
was worth next to nothing
when it came to the cross.
Jesus, God himself in flesh,
the one who experienced the most powerful, tangible presence of God,
blinding light and the voice of God
owning him
as God's beloved.
Jesus had seen God
in all God's power and glory and mystery.
And still he asked that final day,
hanging in agony,
barely able to breathe
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
There was no answer. No magical Superman-like act
that would save him at the last minute. Instead, just the desolated cry of abandonment.

And
then
the cry of faith. "Father, into your hands
I commend
my spirit."

For all Christ felt

the total abandonment of God,
he knew
that if everything he had lived for, everything he had died for
was true
then God was with him
and he could trust God
with his last breath.

We want the certainty the certainty of an in-person meeting with God.
We want that mountain top experience.
Some of us
may be lucky enough
to experience something like that.
But for most of us
our meetings with God
will be much less dramatic.
The presence of God
alongside us
day by day
even when we don't know it.
The knowledge that God
has not abandoned us.

The play ended
kind of abruptly.
You could tell the journalist
wasn't quite convinced.
She wasn't quite sure
that she wanted this God
who was with her
but didn't do something dramatic
to stop bad things happen.
She wasn't sure
that she wanted this God
who was with her
but didn't make his presence clearly known.
But that's the God
she got.
A God
who made it possible

for her to survive those terrible times of her childhood.
Who walked beside her
and gave her strength.
Who inspired her, week after week, to write the stories
that changed other people's lives.

That's the God
we get.
Who has all the power and the glory, so much so
that the few people who have seen it in all its fullness
have been terrified,
but who chooses
to stay in the background
always present, never abandoning us,
giving us strength, inspiring us.

And if Jesus
is anything to go by,
that's what really matters.
The face-to-face, in-person
meetings with God — they can be amazing and terrifying and transforming.
But it's the day by day presence of God
that keeps us going through the tough times,
that gives us strength, that grants us peace.

And that's why
one of the most significant things we will do today
when we baptize little Mila
is that we will sign her with the sign of the cross - to remind her that she is Christ's own
forever,
that no matter what happens,
Christ is with her.
As it is for all of us.
Baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Welcomed into the household of God.
And marked as Christ's own
forever.