**The Source of Strength**

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

 “My what?” That was the response given by Moseley when Baxter said to Moseley, “your strength has made me strong.” “My what”? Moseley had absolutely no perception of himself as someone who is strong, much less have the capacity to offer strength to another. Yet, here on the beach, in the eyes of his friend Baxter, Mosley is transfigured from someone who is weak, insignificant, inconsequential, into a person of strength.

 To fully appreciate this exchange, its relevance for our Scripture and its relevance for us, it would probably help if I gave you a little bit of the back story. I apologize if you have been intentionally trying to avoid the British drama, Downton Abby, which just completed its 4th season on Public Television. I missed the first two seasons entirely, but several of my UCC breakfast colleagues were into the program and every Tuesday morning they would rehash something that happened that Sunday evening. I started feeling like a school kid who was missing out on what everyone else was talking about. I couldn’t take it any longer so last summer Michele and I watched a few back episodes, then we got hooked and eventually caught up.

Now I can tell you all about the Crawley family on their big British estate. There is Robert, the patriarch, Cora his heiress wife, Robert’s mother Violet, what a hoot she is and, of course, Lady Mary, Lady Edith and dare I mention Lady Sybil. There was also Matthew Crawely. Wasn’t that sad. Lot’s of drama in that family. Then, of course, there is the staff with all their intrigue, including Mr. Bates.

 But, for our purposes this morning, you really don’t need to know all about the Crawleys with their money and big estate or even the staff for that matter. What you do need to know is that Baxter is Lady Cora’s maid. Thomas, an assistant butler, has something on Baxter, which he threatens to disclose unless the maid Baxter does his bidding. Thomas is constantly prodding Baxter to give up confidential information she learns about the Crawley family and others in the household.

Moseley is the other one you need to know something about. Moseley used to be a valet, which is one of the higher positions to which a servant can aspire. But, Moseley has had some very bad misfortune, causing him ultimately to take a position as a Footman, which is pretty much a beginner job in the servant department. Because of his station in life and because things have turned out badly for him, Moseley has a pretty low opinion of himself. Yet, when Moseley sees Thomas bullying Baxter for more information, he does not let his lowly opinion of himself get in the way, instead Moseley says to Baxter “I don’t care about your past, but you cannot let Thomas bully you into his schemes. It is sometimes better to take a risk, than to do what is wrong”.

 The servants have been given a day off at the beach. Baxter comes up to Moseley, who sees himself as nothing but an inconsequential failure, and Baxter says, “your strength has made me strong”.

 Who knows exactly what happened on the mountain with Jesus. Matthew calls the experience of the disciples a vision. But, whatever happened, we do know that it was on the mountain that Peter, James and John saw Jesus in a way that they had never quite seen before. Matthew says, “and he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white”. This is a pivotal memory that will stay with the disciples the rest of their lives. More than once they will close their eyes, remember what they saw in Jesus and hear again the voice, which seemed to echo up and down the mountain. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased, listen to him.” Then, as they sat their trembling, Jesus reaches out, touches them and says “Get up and do not be afraid.” Jesus is transfigured. They are transfigured, no longer able to see themselves as they once did and in the words of Baxter, Lady Cora’s maid, the disciples find themselves saying, about Jesus “your strength has made me strong.”

The disciples are the first to tell you that following the way of Jesus presents you with many challenges. Following the way of Jesus calls upon us to be forgiving when we would rather hold on to anger and bitterness. It calls upon us to be generous when we would rather focus only on our own needs. Following the way of Jesus calls upon us to be truth tellers when it would be easier to hide from the truth. It calls upon us to speak out on behalf of people being mistreated, even though it is much easier and much less risky to remain silent. Following the way of Jesus calls upon us to be loving and compassionate even when we feel neither loving nor compassionate. The question is where do we find the strength to truly be the people God calls us to be? Where do we find the strength to be forgiving, loving, , prophetic truth tellers, courageous, compassionate?

Baxter turns to Moseley and says, “your strength has made me strong.” “My what?” says Moseley. Most of us have a picture of Jesus as unflinching, never questioning strength. Some of this comes from the Gospels, which took Jesus seriously when he said to the disciples wait until the whole story is played out before you draw any conclusions about my strength. “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen and heard, until after the son of man has been raised.” All of the Gospels are written from the perspective of the resurrection. The church has added to this portrayal of Jesus by making him look God like even as a baby. In the process the full humanity of Jesus often gets lost. Yet, in spite of this post Easter portrayal the Gospels nonetheless give us a Jesus who is growing, learning, maturing as one who reveals the depth of God’s love. The disciples are followers of Jesus because they experience in Jesus the strength to live with compassion, forgiveness and carrying in a way they have never before encountered. Yet, when they name Jesus strength, when they say to Jesus, here is what I see in you, I wonder if there were times when Jesus like Moseley said, “my what?”

Jesus is fully human and to be human is to feel our own weakness, to at times feel inconsequential, insignificant, as if you have nothing to contribute. To be fully human is to know disappointment like Moseley knew disappointment, having to pick yourself up and start all over from the ground up. To be fully human is to have made mistakes like the maid Baxter has made, facing a past about which she feels ashamed and would rather no one ever know. To be fully human is to end up on a cross, as Matthew tells us, with the words hanging from your mouth, “my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

On that mountain, Jesus is transfigured so the disciples see a strength in Jesus they have never before seen. It is a strength that becomes essential for all the challenges they and Jesus are yet to face on their journey to Jerusalem. But, it is only after they have experienced the biggest disappointment, the greatest loss they can imagine, that they also discover the source of the strength they encounter in Jesus.

The power of God’s love is stronger than the brutality and injustice of empires and all the systemic forces of oppression. The power of God’s love is stronger than all the failures, struggles, and losses that come our way. Jesus has been crucified, but Christ is still present and is encountered in every act of kindness, forgiveness, love, courage, prophetic truth telling, generosity and compassion. This is our affirmation of faith. “Your strength has made me strong”.

**Exodus 24:12-18**

*One of the great ironies for what we know as the ten commandments is the way they have been utilized to maintain the status quo and keep people constrained by acceptable social norms. We should never forget the commandments are given by God to help people on their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom and God is with them on that journey. In today’s lesson Moses goes to the mountain to receive the commandments. When the presence of God is revealed nothing ever looks quite the same.*

The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

**Matthew 17:1-9**

*Our Gospel lesson echoes the story of Moses on the mountain with God. Matthew frequently helps us recognize how the Christian tradition lives on the foundation of the Jewish tradition. Today’s lesson is commonly referred to as the transfiguration of Jesus. It is on the mountain that the disciples see Jesus in a way they have never seen him before. Yet, according to Matthew, seeing the fullness Jesus requires the lens of his death and resurrection.*

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."