

February 27, 2022 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “Reassuring or Frightening Depends on the Relationship”

Once again, good morning and welcome! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. I accompany Brent Brewer, the guy currently manning the audio/video equipment and serving as an elder of the Buildings and Grounds Committee here at FPC. I am also mom to 9-year-old Alonzo and 7-year-old Lillian, whom many of you know by their hats and their enthusiastic answers during children’s sermons. On Sundays, I lead a video discussion Sunday School class. On weekdays, I teach and do research in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU. In general, I try to keep the chemicals and equations out of sermons, but today I could think of no better examples, so please bear with me while I will indulge in telling you about one of my favorite chemicals, hydrogen peroxide, or H_2O_2 .

Most of you have encountered hydrogen peroxide in its medical application: a 3-5% solution used to disinfect wounds, in particular, the skinned knees and elbows of childhood. Hydrogen peroxide pours on as a clear liquid, then bubbles and tingles once it touches the skin. The sensation is not a comfortable one, but far preferable to the piercing burn of rubbing alcohol. At 3-5%, the oxidizing power is enough to kill the germs without doing damage to the surrounding skin.

During my undergraduate studies, I experienced hydrogen peroxide in a stronger form. I was assisting with a research project to make plastics from wood waste. The hydrogen peroxide was part of the wood pretreatment, designed to break down the brown lignin coating and expose the cellulose fibers of the wood. Once properly pretreated, these fibers can be cut into sugar molecules by enzymes and those sugars converted into biodegradable plastics by microorganisms. Hydrogen peroxide has a similar role as “breaker downer” in the production of fluffy white toilet paper from recycled paper or the remover of stains in some laundry detergents. Hydrogen peroxide’s magic as a “green” chemical is in its decomposition products (water and oxygen), which are typically much safer than anything that can be produced by chlorine bleach or other oxidizers.

Anyhow, a 3-5 % hydrogen peroxide solution was not going to work on the wood waste, so one of my jobs in the research was to very carefully add a 30% solution to the reaction vessel once the wood mixture was hot and the other solvents had done their work. I can tell you with confidence that 30% is more powerful than 5% and that lab supervisors are particular about protective gloves for a reason. The regular tingle sensation is definitely a burn, and contact leaves behind a bright white and dead patch of skin that takes a few days to heal. The solution from the manufacturing process is even stronger, capable of igniting organic materials or decomposing explosively enough to be used as rocket fuel. On a tour of a hydrogen peroxide facility, I witnessed a demonstration in which a splash of 68% hydrogen peroxide was set a leather glove on fire. Same substance: on one hand, so much safer than other options; on the other, so very dangerous when not handled correctly.

Now let me switch from chemicals to people. I have two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister. My brother is the kind of person that high school football coaches dream about: six foot six inches tall and built like a bulldozer. He comes in handy when intimidation is needed, yet anyone who knows him can tell you that he is far more likely to cause pain with bad puns and nerdy jokes than with physical violence. My

sister is the opposite: perhaps five foot four with the right shoes and not that visually imposing...unless you have known her for as long as I have and know how fierce and determined she is. Amongst my family, that includes several towering men and women, we have a saying: “you have to watch out for the little ones: they’re concentrated”.

The presence of God, when made observable to people, is like a concentrated substance or personality—powerful and intimidating without the preparatory training. We see this in the response of Peter in our reading from Luke about the Transfiguration:

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

For those used to the wonders that can be created by artificial lighting and video special effects, the glowing face and clothes, the appearance of two men from the Old Testament stories, and the cloud-on-demand may not seem like that much. Peter, James, and John, however, did not have any of those experiences to draw on. We have to empathize a little as Peter fumbles for some kind of appropriate response; hospitality and humility seemed like a good start when Moses and Elijah are present.

I have always wondered why, of all the people that could have appeared with Jesus during the Transfiguration, were Moses and Elijah there. Why not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob? Ruth, Esther, or Deborah? David, Daniel, or Gideon? One possibility is that Moses and Elijah had uniquely close relationships with God during their lives and they served as God’s representatives to the Israelites and to the Gentiles.

From our Exodus reading, we hear of Moses coming down from the mountain for the second time with the Ten Commandments. This is one of those stories where the significance can be lost without more context. Here, the Israelites had very good reason to be frightened when Moses came down from the mountain. A little less than two months before, God had made THE covenant with Israel. This covenant contained the details for Israel to be God’s chosen people: the construction of the Tabernacle, the rules for offerings, etc. Israel had eagerly agreed to this relationship. They had already learned to depend on God in the desert, with allotments of manna and quail, and water from the rocks. The Israelites had made their promises and Moses had went up the mountain to get the ten commandments from God. During the long 40 days that Moses was gone, the Israelites became impatient and had Aaron make that infamous golden calf. When Moses came down the mountain that first time and saw what the Israelites were doing, he was so upset that he broke the special stone tablets that God had carved. Moses burned and ground up the calf statue, mixed the powder into the water source, and made the revelers drink the contaminated water. Levites rallied to Moses’ side and killed 3,000 of the people who had participated. It was indeed a very dark day in the relationship between God and his people.

Moses pleaded with God to not destroy the Israelites on the spot. God relented, yet was still very angry. As punishment, an angel of God led the people instead of the presence of God himself and many more Israelites died of a plague as they went. In the chapter before our reading, Moses continues his mediation efforts. He asked God to bring back His presence and to teach him His ways. God was pleased with Moses and granted this appeal. Moses then makes an unusual and impractical request: to see the glory of God. We read from Exodus 33, starting at verse 18:

¹⁸ Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." ¹⁹ And he [God] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

34 The LORD said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. ² Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. ³ No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." ⁴ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

While Moses is on the mountain this second time, the Israelites waited nervously. On the mountain,

⁵ The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD."

⁶ The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,

"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation."

God then restarted the relationship with His people. He reviewed the terms of the covenant with Moses. Moses re-carved the ten commandments onto the new stone tablets. After 40 days with God, it was time for Moses to return to the people to give them God's answer. You can now better imagine the Israelites' feelings when they saw Moses' face glowing on his way down the mountain's slope. The presence of God was clear but they did not yet know that God was giving them a second chance. Naturally, the glowing face was terrifying. The Israelites needed Moses reassurance.

We read about Elijah's time with God in 1 Kings, a little over a hundred years after the reigns of David and Solomon. God had just demonstrated his power by sending down fire from heaven to light the altar that Elijah had built to defeat the priests of Baal. Queen Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, was furious with Elijah and had threatened to kill him. Elijah had fled for his life into the wilderness towards Horeb, where he eventually found a cave for shelter. In chapter 19, we read:

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹¹ He [God] said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Encouraged by God's presence, and the promise of the remaining faithful, Elijah did as God commanded. Later, instead of a regular death, Elijah was taken up directly to be with God. Moses, likewise, received a special burial from God.

Fast forward back to our Gospel reading. We, like Peter, James, and John, have a lot we can learn from Moses and Elijah. These three disciples had already witnessed several of Jesus' miracles, so one would think that they were more prepared than most. Yet, they were still uncertain of God's intentions and were afraid. They did not know what to do with Jesus' teachings and the signs of God's presence.

While I would like to think that I would have reacted to the Transfiguration as Moses and Elijah did to God's presence, I also have my doubts. Part of me knows that God's intentions for me are good and that His power should be a comfort. The other part of me, however, knows that my relationship with God is not what it should be. I have not followed God's instructions to put him first in my life, to make good and wise decisions for myself, and to love my neighbors. When I think about my actions, the thought of being in God's presence is awkward, like being in the presence of a friend or family member that I have hurt.

So how do we get to the point where the glow of God's presence is something to bask in rather than something to cower away from? The answer for Peter, James, and John, and for ourselves, was thankfully there on the mountain on Transfiguration day in the form of God's perfect son Jesus.

We do not enter God's presence alone. Rather, we enter with the one who does have the perfect relationship with God and who freely gives us his credentials in exchange for the mistakes and missteps that we have made. Jesus took away our impatient and rebellious actions, those times when we have

substituted our own versions of the golden calf for what God offers. Sometimes the golden calf is our self-reliance, thinking that we know best about what is good for us. Sometimes it is giving in to our anxiety, compromising in messy situations because we fear we have no other way out. Sometimes it is our selfishness, disregarding the needs and feelings of those around us because we want to be comfortable. Whatever the case may be, it is when we are most pulling away from God that Jesus pulls us closer.

In my work with students on campus and in the broader community, there are numerous times when the strained relationship between God and his children is especially evident. They do not want to hear about God. They do not want to interact with anything to do with the church. Past relationships with people of the church are too painful and the presence of God is too concentrated. At such times, we need to remember to be gentle. Those God loves need to see Jesus as our mediator. Our words and actions are one of the ways that God accomplishes this. Therefore, listen first; sit with those who are lonely or scared; offer the glass of water; bind up wounds. God's estranged children need to know that God provides a path to a renewed relationship no matter how far we have wandered. This does not mean that God has stopped being God—as we have been learning in our Sunday School class, God is still perfect, still omniscient, still omnipresent, still omnipotent. The thing that changes with faith in Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is that we can learn to find the attributes of God reassuring instead of frightening. We can be like Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, without fear, talking with Jesus about the wonderful things that God has done and continues to do for us.

Let us close with a prayer that would have a place on the mountain of Transfiguration, using the words of the familiar hymn:

To God be the glory, great things He hath done,
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life our redemption to win,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the earth hear His voice;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the people rejoice;
Oh, come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory; great things He hath done.

Lyrics from <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/39>.