

MYSTERY ON A MOUNTAIN

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."

(Matthew 17:1-9, NRSV)

I remember the first time I saw the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. My family had taken the ultimate road trip in our wood-grained station wagon, driving from our home in Memphis to the Grand Canyon and on out to California, then back through Colorado and up to Yellowstone before finally heading home. This was the late 1970's, and we had a tape of John Denver's hit, "Rocky Mountain High," to get us primed for the experience.

Everything had been flat as can be until gradually off in the distance we saw a dark form emerging. It looked a lot like storm clouds, but in fact it was the "purple mountain's majesty" of America's Rocky Mountains. We camped in Rocky Mountain National Park for several days. I remember seeing buffalo, elk, mountain goats, and rams. I remember the wonderful wild flowers and the fresh mountain air. I remember wading barefoot in ice-cold mountain streams and watching the trout swim by. But most of all, I remember the view from atop the peaks. Sometimes it was sunny, and we could see for miles. At other times the clouds were low and the visibility was zilch. But no matter what the view, my feelings were the same: wonder and awe in the face of such beauty, and out of that stillness, a closeness to God.

What is it about mountains that make them seem so spiritual? Perhaps it's their sheer immensity reminding us of God's magnitude. Perhaps it's the fact that from the mountaintop we can see for miles, and gain a fresh perspective on our lives. Or perhaps it's because the mountains stretch up into the heavens, inviting us to turn our eyes away from earth.

It seems that mountains have long held this allure, this ability to help bridge the gap between humans and God. In the Old Testament, we read about Mount Sinai—the mountain that Moses climbed in order to receive the Ten Commandments and seal the covenant between his people and God. It was Mount Sinai where God spoke directly to Moses and revealed God's divine presence.

Mount Zion played its part as well. Located in the holy city of Jerusalem, this mountain eventually became associated with the Jewish Temple built near it. Only three Jewish temples were ever built throughout the entire Bible and all of them were built on the same location. The first one was built during King Solomon's reign, and later destroyed. The second was built under the leadership of Zerubbabel. It too was destroyed. The final temple was built under the reign of King Herod and was the temple that existed during Jesus' time. The Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D. Throughout these various temples, the one constant was their proximity to Mount Zion (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible R-Z*, George A. Buttrick, editor, 1962, p. 534 & 959).

In the New Testament, we read that Jesus preached his most famous sermon on a mountain, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. Following his baptism, Jesus was tempted atop a very high mountain. In each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we are told that Jesus withdrew to the mountains for private prayer and communion with God. Jesus' triumphal ride on Palm Sunday passed through the Mount of Olives, which is where the crowd met him. His agonizing night of prayer and betrayal took place on the lower slopes of this Mount in the Garden of Gethsemane. And the final sighting of Jesus on earth occurred on the Mount of Olives, from which he ascended into Heaven (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, Paul Achtemeier, editor, 1996, p. 710).

It should come as no surprise that the story in today's scripture lesson took place on a mountain as well. It is the story of the Transfiguration, a story that was seen as so important to the biblical writers that it shows up in three of the four gospels, and in the book of II Peter as well. It's the story of an ordinary invitation to an extraordinary event. It's the story of what can happen on a mountain, surrounded by the presence of God.

The beginning of the story is easy enough to understand. Jesus had invited three of his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John to climb a mountain with him. But what happened next has remained shrouded in mystery for 2,000 years.

The account in Matthew tells us that Jesus was transfigured or transformed before his disciples so that "...his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light" (17:2). As the experience continued Moses and Elijah, both long dead, appeared as well and talked to Jesus. The event climaxed when a cloud overshadowed the men, and from out of the cloud a voice spoke: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (17:5b).

Upon hearing the voice of God, Peter, James, and John fell to the ground, filled with wonder and awe about the unbelievable activities taking place before their very eyes. Jesus, full of compassion, walked over and touched each one of them saying, "Get up and don't be afraid." With pounding hearts and puzzled minds the disciples raised their heads and opened their eyes to see only one man left, Jesus. When they climbed back down the mountain, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone about the vision until after his resurrection.

What really happened up on that mountain on that mystifying day? In Matthew, Jesus refers to it as a vision. If you and I had been there would we have seen and heard the same things? And why was the vision only shared with Peter, James, and John? Was it because they were the only ones spiritually mature enough to be open to the experience? Was it because Jesus knew they would keep the secret or because these three disciples needed the vision more than the rest of them? We simply don't know.

And that's okay. I think what's most important is not what did or didn't happen, or why exactly Peter, James, and John happened to be the chosen few. To me, what's important is what it means to us today. How does this story relate to our lives?

One of my favorite aspects of this story is its ordinary beginning. Peter, James, and John had no idea what lay ahead when they agreed to climb that mountain. For all they knew, their time together would be nothing more than run of the mill—maybe a picnic, a little conversation, a chance to get away from it all. Instead, they got the Transfiguration complete with supernatural lighting, two ancient Hebrew superstars coming back from the dead, and the heavenly voice of God.

I think that most of God's invitations come to us today in the same guise of the ordinary, just as the three disciples began their day. We've heard God's invitation so many times in so many ways it can begin to sound almost blasé, like one more saccharine poem on a greeting card. And yet I fully believe that when we accept God's invitation to be kind, to be merciful, to love one another, that we can transform our lives and our world.

Of course, we do have to say yes. Yes, I'll go on the mountain climb. Yes, I'll love my neighbor. Yes to whatever God's invitation may be. We may not always feel like saying yes. We may feel inadequate. We may feel too busy. We may even find the idea entirely boring. But whatever the invitation, we know that God accompanies us. And from God's presence, we can draw strength, encouragement, and inspiration. Jesus didn't tell Peter, James, and John to climb alone. He asked them to climb alongside him. God is with us every step of our journeys, through the mundane and the miraculous, the every day and the extraordinary, the mountaintop highs and the valleys of despair.

We know from reading further on in the Bible that the changes that took place on that mountain included changes in the disciples as well. Despite extreme highs and lows in the months and years ahead, these three disciples continued to grow in their faith, to follow Christ more and more faithfully. These three disciples became three of the most important leaders later on. The vision was a gift, and they built upon it to become the kinds of leaders God needed to begin and grow the church.

Whether or not we receive such gifts, my hope is that we can learn to live every day with our spiritual eyes wide open, for we never know what sacred moment awaits us. That we continue to climb that mountain day after day, even when nothing happens at all and the only sounds we hear are random thoughts running through our heads. We may not see visions. We may not hear the voice of God. We may not experience the

miraculous, the mysterious. But one thing is no mystery—with the abiding presence of Christ in our lives, we too can be transformed by God's holy love. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have spoken to us in the voice of conscience, in the words of the Bible, and in the promptings of your Holy Spirit. You have shown us what is best in high ideals and deep convictions, in the example of those committed people of faith who have gone before us, and mostly in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. You have tried to teach us in the ordinary experiences of life as well. You have called us to the life of love, to the forgiving of each other, to the helping of those in need, to the caring which is like your care. And yet too many times we have missed opportunities to do good and at other times have intentionally chosen the wrong path. Forgive us we pray.

Challenge us to see the problems of our time as opportunities to work together with you in the healing of the world. Encourage us when we feel overwhelmed and cynically throw up our hands in despair. Remind us of the difference the smallest kindness can make in another person's life. And help us be faithful through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.