

“THE MOUNTAINS OF GOD”

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9 Feb. 23, 2020

Throughout human history, mountains have been strategic locations. They are impervious to floods, they provide an important view of the surrounding area and mountain strongholds are traditionally recognized as very difficult to attack and conquer.

Mountains also imply strength and permanence. To suggest that a mountain will be shaken or moved is to suggest that all bets are off—anything can happen. After all, the grandest statement of a person’s abilities is to claim that he or she can “move mountains.” Because of their overwhelming size and permanence, mountains have also come to symbolize our most immense obstacles. The person with a rare sense of adventure will set out to climb mountains. And, in our day-to-day human experience, we associate mountains with spectacular views. How many of us have had the opportunity to look down from some high place—“from lofty mountain grandeur,” as the hymn writer expresses it—and felt overwhelmed by the panoramic beauty of the view.

Mountains are also prominent in our scripture readings this Sunday. We read that Moses was invited up the mountain. In this case, the mountain was the famous Sinai, which dominates so many chapters of Exodus, and which ever since has represented both an experience and a covenant. We discover that a cloud has covered that mountain and fire was on top of it. Moses is reported to have stayed on the mountain for forty days. In the gospel lection, Matthew reports that Jesus led his inner circle “up to a high mountain.” This is the site and setting then where the Transfiguration occurred. Some years later Peter recalls in his epistle that occasion “while we were with him on the holy mountain.”

Mountain top experiences are a way of exploring the mountains of God.

So why Transfiguration Sunday? Why is it significant enough to be a stand alone Sunday? It is one of those Sundays that are unfamiliar to those without the background of “church talk.” So why do we bother every year? Because we need it!

It is a threshold day or weekend. It provides a chance to mark a step from one reality into another. When change happens, we often miss it. All of a sudden, we look around and think to ourselves, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we aren’t in Kansas anymore!” And we aren’t. The colors are different; the sounds are

different; the feel is different. How did we get here? Who knows? But we're here, in this not-Kansas place and time. And somehow we missed the doorway from that to this, the threshold from one life to another. It is the way of things, it seems.

The shapers of the Christian calendar, however, seemed to think threshold experiences are important, for some reason. We can't go long throughout the Christian year without stumbling through a doorway, from one mode to another. Tripping over a threshold from what was into what is or even what will be. There is something about faith that demands we pay attention. We are asked to choose with eyes wide open. And then we are to walk aware of every step along the way and to be alive to each moment and be present in each encounter.

So, this weekend we step from the season after Epiphany into Lent. We move from an adoration of the light into an encounter with our own personal darkness. The light that sustained us before and now lives in us is not quite hidden by our own failings. If we stay alert, we can navigate even the broken pavement of our own sinfulness because we walk the path of the one who goes before, carrying our cross. At its best, most significant and most helpful, Lent is a difficult journey. It involves a willingness to be honest, which is a difficult task at the best of times. But this honesty is self-directed. We have to be honest with ourselves. We have to be honest in our assessment, honest in our helplessness, honest in our commitment to the path that rises before us and our utter inability to walk that path on our own. That kind of honest is rare, to say the least. So what did the framers of the Christian liturgical year tell us we needed for this? Transfiguration.

An odd little mystical moment on the top of a mountain witnessed by only a few. And those few were so bewildered by the event it was a kindness when they were told not to talk about it as they walked down the mountain. But if they were troubled by the vision in an era when those things might not have been common, but certainly a part of the culture, we, on the other hand, would be questioning our sanity and looking for therapies or medications to remove the moment from our minds. Such things don't happen, we believe. Lights and clouds and voices are signs of some instability, we are convinced. Maybe it would help those dummies in a more innocent age. But we know better. We know such a sight is a trick of the light, or a product of stress, or a reaction to mediation, something we ate. If we did see something like this, we would close our eyes, rub them really hard, and then count, maybe even turn away before opening our eyes, again.

Wouldn't we? Of course we would. No one sees visions these days. No one experiences the light. No one sees Jesus, glowing or not, with their eyes anyway. Now Jesus is an idea to consider. A concept to grasp. Or at best a history to learn. So, let's look at the history Matthew records.

Six days later. Later than what. Later, after Peter's confession. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples. Peter jumps in with "You're the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One!" OK, he didn't say three different things, but we hear three things, or more from that one thing. *Christos*. He sounds so certain. So confident. Jesus pats him on the back, gives him a gold star, and Peter beams metaphorically. Orthodontically. Had the event ended there, it would have been a highlight in Peter's lifetime movie reel. But Jesus goes on and says it's going to get bad, going to get dark. He decides to be open to them about the truth of his journey and the suffering to come. He doesn't hold back, doesn't pull punches, and Peter can only take so much. Peter says, "No way!! It's not going to happen. You've got it wrong! This isn't how it goes. Just stop Jesus, just stop."

Actually he doesn't say all that. Matthew says that Peter's words were, "God forbid it, Lord! It won't happen." But I think it was the same thing that he said before that got him the gold star. "*Christos!*" This can't be how the story goes, he thinks. The anointed one doesn't descent into death! That isn't the narrative; that isn't the script. Jesus doesn't know what he's talking about, thinks Peter. Even when he gets rebuked. Even when the *Christos* calls him Satan, the adversary. Peter still mutters to himself, no way. He's just confused, just fooling with us, just...wrong.

Six days later, they climb a mountain. Did they draw straws to decide who got to go along on this field trip? If they did, I'm pretty sure Jesus did some sleight of hand to make sure Peter drew the right straw. Maybe Peter was the whole reason the trip was planned. Peter and the Zebedee boys who nodded along to everything Peter said. Maybe it wasn't a reward trip, but a remedial one. The world's highest woodshed. Time-out mountain.

Once they arrived at the peak, there wasn't any small talk. It just happened. IT happened. The light show. The vision. The...whatever it was. Matthew says, "He was transfigured before them." Just like that. Like it happened every day or something. Like Jesus just stood there and slipped off the human skin and let the God bones show through. Easy as that. Except Jesus didn't do it. He was transfigured. Angels maybe, like backstage dressers, reached up and pulled

the dull and dirty robe he wore and slipped his divine vestments back on. I wonder if it felt comfortable to him at that point, or whether he was more used to the everyday work clothes he'd been wearing for the past thirty-plus years.

This event, however, was not really for him. He wore the glory as comfortably as he wore the shame of humanity, and he managed to glorify even that. He was, that's all we need to say. He was. He was who he was. No, the transfiguration was for them and not him. It was for them to see him. It was for them to know him as much as their human brains would allow them to know him. They stumbled a little, trembled in their mountain climbing boots. Peter cleared his throat and put his foot in his mouth. Again. "Let's camp out," he says. "Let's hang. Here. In the light and the cloud. Settle in. Bask in the glory and wonder." Uh, no. Peter, this moment is the starting pistol, the train whistle, as it pulls out of the station. This is change for moving, not for staying the same, not for settling in but for moving on. And it's certainly not for going back to the good old days. Nothing remains the same after the mount of transfiguration.

And then, to ensure that they didn't miss it, the voice comes, telling them to pay attention, telling them to get moving, telling them to trust. And that nearly killed them—flat out on the ground, a heart attack in the making. Until they felt a gentle hand, and they looked up and saw only Jesus. I love that phrase from Matthew. They saw no one except Jesus. What else could they possibly need? How could you be better equipped, more prepared with anything else? They saw no one except Jesus.

Open your eyes. There is glory all around us, light and color and wonder and beauty. But we have to want to see. We have to set aside the skepticism that says that there are no mysteries anymore and lean into the real behind the reality we think we know. The message of the transfiguration is simple. And that message is: Jesus is trustworthy. You can lean on him. You can trust in him. You can put your life in his hands. Now, get up and don't be afraid. And everywhere you look, even in a messy world, when you seek a leader to follow, when you seek a Savior to worship, when you seek a Companion for your journey, you will see no one except Jesus. With God's help, let it be so. Amen and amen.