

The Mountain of the Lord
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Matthew 17:1-9

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

4 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.”

5 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!”

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9 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.”

In the Old Testament the mountain was often the place where God’s people encountered the presence of God. That was especially true for the two Old Testament saints mentioned in our lesson for today, Moses and Elijah.

MOSES

Moses taught that the mountain of the Lord was holy. And he told the people not to even come near the mountain of the Lord. The presence of God was too much for them to handle.

In Exodus we read that thunder and lightning accompanied a thick cloud that descended upon Mount Sinai. There was a trumpet blast so loud that the people trembled.

And when the people assembled at the foot of the mountain anticipating the presence of the Lord, the mountain shook violently as the “smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln.”

If we were doing a movie on this scene, it would greatly benefit from special effects and full surround sound.

Only Moses was allowed to ascend the holy mountain to hear God’s Word. And Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, and he ate nothing the whole time he was on the mountain.

On the mountain God gave Moses the law and the commandments and the plans for the Tabernacle. On the mountain the nation of Israel was formed.

This image of the holy mountain stayed with God’s people. It was an important part of their story.

Today when we speak of a mountaintop experience, this is often what we mean. We are talking about an encounter with the holy, something that lifts us up and transports us into the presence of God.

ELIJAH

The prophet Elijah also had a mountaintop experience with God. His mountaintop experience came when he was very discouraged.

The prophet thought that all of the Israelites had forsaken the Lord. The other prophets had been killed, and it was only a matter of time before he too would be killed.

It was then that Elijah was told to go and stand on the mountain of the Lord because the presence of the Lord was about to pass by. Once again we need surround sound and visual pyrotechnics in order to get a sense of what happened.

There was a great wind, a wind so strong that it was breaking rocks in pieces, and it threatened to split the mountain in half. Next there came an earthquake. And finally there was a great fire.

But, in each case the refrain was the same. The presence of the Lord was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire.

No after all of these special effects there comes one more sign. It is as the NRSV translates it, “the sound of sheer silence.”

The “sound of sheer silence” seems almost contradictory. How can there be a sound when there is sheer silence?

I think I know what they are trying to convey with that phrase. Sometimes in a moment of great importance everything seems to come to a halt. And in this moment of sheer silence the anticipation of what is to come is overwhelming.

I think that’s a great description of a holy encounter. It’s not just having time to reflect spiritually. It is being overwhelmed by the anticipation of what is to come. It is a moment of being totally aware. Even the silence is “deafening” in that moment.

And in this moment of sheer silence on the mountain Elijah encounters the presence of God.

Elijah covered his face in the presence of the Almighty, and the prophet learns an amazing truth. He was not alone after all. There were seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed to the false god, Baal. God is not done with his people yet. God is going to deliver them from this oppressive rule.

These stories (and more) lie in the background of our lesson for today. So when the Bible tells us that Jesus went up a high mountain, it’s about more than location. It’s about more than finding a quiet place to reflect and meditate.

It’s about revelation. It’s about the presence of God.

TRANSFIGURATION

It’s about learning that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It’s about total transformation. It’s about a new creation.

It’s about transfiguration.

The Bible tells us that transfiguration occurred that day. Jesus was transfigured on that high mountain. The Greek word is related to our word, metamorphosis. As a caterpillar changes into a butterfly so the appearance of Jesus was totally changed.

His face shone like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white. And he was seen talking to two figures from the past, Moses and Elijah.

The Sadducees once challenged Jesus on the idea of a resurrection. “How can there be a resurrection? Show us in Scripture where there is any talk of resurrection?”

Jesus said, “Well, when Moses encountered the presence of God in the burning bush, God identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That meant Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive to God. In fact all are alive to God.”

And today we see an example of this on the mountain. Moses and Elijah are talking with the transfigured Jesus on the mountain of the Lord.

The point of this story is very clear. God was in Christ. In the man Jesus we see the glory of the Lord, the very face of God. All are alive to him.

LISTEN

The response of Peter to all this seems very logical. Let’s build three shrines on the mountain. Quite often in the Old Testament markers were built to commemorate important events. Places were seen as holy.

We talk about the Holy Land. This suggests that the places where the events of the Bible took place are special. Many people go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land hoping to get a whiff of the eternal.

But, the holy is not found in a place. The high mountain of transfiguration cannot be found on a map. It is found in the Word of God, specifically in the words of Jesus.

Peter’s comment about building three shrines is interrupted by what follows. The Scripture says that while Peter is still speaking a luminescent cloud “overshadows them” and a voice from that cloud says,

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

It’s almost as if God is telling Peter and the other disciples, “Will you shut up already and just listen to him?”

The mountain provides the opportunity to listen to Jesus.

These past few weeks we've been studying the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus took his disciples up the mountain in order to learn what it meant to be his disciple.

The gospel of Matthew ends with another mountaintop encounter in which Jesus gives his disciples final instructions about their mission before he ascends into heaven. (Matthew 28:16-20)

The point of the mountain is not just to find a mystical place filled with power. The point of the mountain is to find a place where we can listen to Jesus.

If we believe that the glory of God resides in Jesus, then we must learn to listen to him. And listen means more than just hear his words. It means to follow him and put his words into practice.

FEAR

The announcement that Jesus is the Son of God and the command to listen brings the disciples to their knees in fear.

Maybe the disciples realized for the first time that Jesus was more than a Messiah, that he really was the Son of God. Perhaps the command to listen to Jesus reminded them that they weren't really listening to Jesus. Instead they were trying to fit the ministry of Jesus into their mold of what the Messiah should be and do.

Whatever the reason, in an instant the Transfiguration went from being a moment they wanted to preserve to being a moment they wanted to hide from.

I've seen the same movement in my own life. I've sought the holy all my life. I've sought the transforming power of God.

But, then God makes it all too specific, all too down to earth. God tells me to listen to Jesus, to quell my anger, to love and pray for my enemies and do all manner of things that I think are impossible.

And that makes me want to run away and hide. I don't want to listen to that stuff. I just want to bask in the glory!

LENT

The more I read the story of the Transfiguration the more I realize that it is a remarkable summary of salvation history. And it is the perfect passage to lead us from Epiphany into Lent.

You may remember that we began the season of Epiphany with the story of the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus was baptized he heard the same words that we heard today, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We have spent the past few weeks reflecting on how God is revealed in Jesus.

But, today that revelation leads us into a new season, the season of Lent. We leave the glory behind on the mountain and follow Jesus on the path to the leads to the cross.

No wonder the disciples are afraid.

The voice from above tells them to listen, but they have not listened to Jesus. At every turn they have misunderstood or even rejected the words of Jesus.

And in the weeks ahead Peter, James and John will become even more tone deaf to the message of God in Christ. They will fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. They will deny Jesus and run away when he is taken into custody by the authorities.

Jesus will walk the road to the cross by himself.
The disciples will not follow, and they will not listen.

And in the season of Lent we will watch this poignant tragedy not as distant observers but as fellow travelers who also find it hard to understand and follow the demands of Jesus. And if we're honest we will find our own failures and tone-deaf attitudes in the actions of these disciples.

TOUCH

But, Jesus does not leave the disciples on the ground in fear. The Bible tells us that he touches them. Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel this is a sign of healing. He touches them and commands the disciples to stand up.

Literally the word means to be raised. I think this raising of frightened disciples foreshadows the next movement in the drama, the resurrection. Lent is just beginning but already we have a hint of Easter.

The disciples are raised; at least they are raised from their fears. But, they still have a long way to go with Jesus.

As they go down the mountain Jesus gives them an order,

“Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

There is something about this day, this event that can't be understood until after the resurrection.

STILL WITH US

We all have a problem with listening. We actually try to train people to listen. And most of the time we fail.

We have so much to say. We have so much to do. Sometimes we even complete the sentences of the people who are speaking because we don't have time to listen.

Peter was one of those people. Even God had to tell him to be quiet and listen.

But, even that heavenly voice didn't change things for Peter. Peter continued to talk when he should have been listening and because of that Peter would continue to fall to the ground out of fear and failure.

But, Jesus never left Peter on the ground. When everything was gone, when the vision was over and Moses and Elijah were nowhere to be found, Jesus was still with his disciples.

Whatever these signs on the mountain meant one thing was sure. The disciples were once again with Jesus, their teacher and their friend.

As disciples of Jesus they too were God's sons. They too enjoyed the favor of God.

And this was not a gift to be wasted on mountaintop shrines. This favor was to be passed on to a broken and sinful world.

Later they would remember the touch of Jesus, and they would know that they too were called to touch others and lift them up.

On another mountain Jesus would confirm that calling.

In the 28th chapter of Matthew Jesus gives the disciples what we call the Great Commission. He told them that they were to bring the gospel into the whole world. In this way others would hear the words of Jesus.

And then Jesus gave them one more promise. He said in effect,

“Do you that mountaintop experience? Do you remember that time when you felt the power and presence of God?

That power and presence is with you always. I am with you always.” (See Matthew 28:18-19)

Jesus will not leave them.

And maybe that’s what we need to take from this story as well. When everything else fades away, Jesus remains. Jesus will not leave us either.

I’ve had mountaintop experiences. I’ve had times when I felt that God was near. And I’ve also spent my share of time in the valley, when life knocked me flat on my face, and I was very afraid.

But, over time I’ve come to realize that Jesus has always been there, reaching out to lift me up and give me life again.

When the voice from heaven told the disciples to listen to Jesus, that word listen is in the present imperative indicating continual or repeated action.

In other words God was telling those disciples to keep on listening to Jesus.

Listening to Jesus is a life long journey.

We live on the other side of the resurrection, but often our actions suggest that we are not listening to Jesus. Sometimes it seems that we more into shrine building than kingdom building.

But, our building projects and our five-year plans are often interrupted. And we learn that the kingdom of God cannot be built out of brick and mortar.

The kingdom of God can only be built by people who listen to Jesus. The kingdom of God is not about what we want but what God wants.

So let us come down the mountain again with Jesus. Let us walk the long and painful path that leads to the Cross. We know that Jesus is with us every step of the way. And we know that beyond the cross is a resurrection.

As he was lifted up so it will be with us.

Let us ascend the mountain of the Lord and listen once again to the words of Jesus.

This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Listen to him!

Amen.