

Message on the Mountaintop

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

The mountaintop is a literary archetype, a common thematic element that either literally or figuratively brings a person to new level of experience or awareness. The mountaintop tends to be a turning point. The mountaintop provides a revelation that is life-changing, earth-shaking, transformative.

Abraham takes Isaac to a mountaintop to make a faithful sacrifice of his son in God's testing of Abraham's faithfulness. An angel affirms God's promise of numerous descendants for his faithfulness. Not only God, but Abraham himself discovered just how faithful he was to God's commands.

Moses ascends Mt. Sinai, of course, in today's passage.

Elijah goes to Mt. Horeb, which may be the same as Mt. Sinai – it's the mountain of God. Elijah is hiding out there and God finds him. Then God uniquely and mysteriously shows God's self to Elijah. God tells Elijah to stop hiding, and Elijah goes back.

One thing about the mountaintop is that it isn't a place where you can stay. The mountaintop is not a destination, a terminal point on a journey. Yes, it's a place that takes arduous striving to ascend. The promise of the mountaintop energizes the seeker to climb the hurdles, endure the threats, overcome the doubts, and push beyond the limits of self and the exhaustion of the endeavor. It is the meeting place of God.

I probably told you how I climbed a mountain many years ago in my youth. No, there isn't anything dramatic about it. I was in my early 20s, vacationing with a girlfriend and her aunt at the aunt's lovely vacation home near Londonderry, Vermont in late summer. It was near three ski resorts, Mt. Bromley, Mt. Stratton, and Mt. Snow. I think we drove down to Mt. Snow and somehow I got the idea that I could climb the mountain. Maybe it was a challenge, like I said that I could do it and she said I couldn't. She wasn't going to try it, but I decided I would; I would show her.

Now, it isn't that great of an achievement. The base elevation is roughly 2000 feet and the peak is roughly 3500 feet, in essence going about 1500 feet, but at a steep incline.

It was late August in the mountains of Vermont, so that meant daytime highs at best barely 60 and nighttime lows in the mid-30s or lower. The weather was quite nice and it was around 2pm when I started up the grass-covered ski slope. Now 1500 feet on level ground is nothing, however 1500 feet going up a steep incline continually is another matter. Soon, I was carrying my sweater. It took me quite a while, but I got up there. Rested, surveyed the magnificent view, and realized that it had taken me an hour and a half. It was now past 3:30 and getting cooler quickly as the sun declined. Then I realized that I had quite a long descent to make. Going downhill would be less

strenuous, but there was still a lot of effort to be made in making sure that I didn't lose my footing. My trip down the mountain took half the time. My bored girlfriend was relieved I got back without event and was long past ready to go.

If there is any point, it's that ascending the mountain can be difficult. But all in all, there is only one thing to do once you've gotten there. That's going back down the mountain.

And there's one more thing. Whatever you left behind when you went up the mountain will be waiting for you when you come back down.

For Moses, he comes back down and finds out that everything has gone berserk in his absence, thanks to his brother Aaron who was left in charge. The sinful people of God are acting up more than they ever have. He's got these Ten Commandments which he, in a fit of anger, throws at them. He's got to go back up the mountain and get some more Ten Commandments.

Amos has had this heart-to-heart talk with God who tells him to get back in the fight. He doesn't get an army of anything to confront the forces of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He is right where he left off.

Jesus comes back down the mountain with his goofy disciples who are all shook up. He finds a crowd waiting for them, starting with a complaint about his useless disciples who can't seem to do a healing. Jesus is probably like, "Hey, tell me about these disciples!"

The message from the mountaintop needs to be pretty good. Otherwise, it's a bit of a waste of time.

Going back to Moses, he and his leaders get an invitation to come-on-up. God has provided a pathway like sapphire, blue and "clear as the sky itself." Moses, his most trusted leaders and the seventy elders all went up together. According to instructions, only Moses makes the final ascent to receive the tablets of stone.

As Moses enters this sacred space, a cloud covers the mountain, and "the glory of the Lord" settled there. We don't know exactly what "the glory of the Lord" is, but one might assume it is brilliant light since the Israelites saw it as "a consuming fire."

Moses doesn't get to speak with God until the seventh day. And he ends up staying there forty days and nights.

For the next seven chapters, the phrase, "the Lord said to Moses" gets repeated again and again. It's lots of detailed stuff. God tells Moses how *everything* is supposed to be, right down to how to hang the draperies in the Tabernacle. God has even picked the fabrics! Talk about a control freak! God does this with everything; the lampstand, the altar, the ark of the covenant, the table, the courtyard, the oil for the lampstand, the

priestly garments. By the way, boxers, not briefs for priestly underwear – just kidding, but not really. No wonder Moses was up there forty days and forty nights.

God here is like the anxious Mom sending the precious child off to college. The neurotic anxiety is overwhelming. There are lists about *everything* and instructions about what to do in case *anything* happens. God is like the Mom, not chill at all. God has decided that it's time to step back from the day-to-day provisioning, guidance, and care of the Israelites, God's people. They need to know what's expected, and Moses needs to have the authority to set them on the right track and keep them there. They need to start responding independently and responsibly. The gargantuan task ahead gets revealed when Moses heads back down the mountain and into the orgy of the Golden Calf made by God's people to replace God. Not a good start.

Maybe Jesus will fare better? Matthew 17 begins “after six days” which puts Jesus in step with Moses who waits around 6 days before God appears. Therefore, for Jesus, it is the seventh day alike Moses. Jesus isn't required to wait around. He has brought three folks along with him; Peter and the Zebedee brothers.

Jesus is transformed (transfigured) and the bright light that would shine from Moses' face – “the glory of God” – is eclipsed by the description of Jesus' face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming white as light. Then Moses and Elijah, the two most revered figures in Judaism, appear and speak with Jesus. They had nametags. Think about it.

Peter, ever the impulsive one, sees this bizarre display before him. He decides to step up and show some leadership. Peter had been the one disciple who affirmed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” in the preceding story. Of course, he also steps in it promptly enough by denying that Jesus would ever wash his feet.

Undeterred by any insight and learning from past experience, Peter steps in this one, too. He suggests the building of three booths for Jesus and his two friends. This would sound like the way the Feast of Booths is celebrated, a festival commemorating the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and God's people being dependent on the benevolence of God to survive. Of course, there is no reference to suggest that this was the season of the Feast of Booths, but let's at least assume that Peter hasn't had a total meltdown, and that this is indeed that festal season.

Jesus has probably done a face-palm, but God isn't too polite. The text says: *While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!* So, God doesn't even let Peter finish his daft remarks, his divine irritation overflowing, and cuts him off.

The disciples all respond accordingly and fall flat on their faces in abject terror. Jesus assures them, “Don't be afraid.” I don't know if that worked. But the real question is: Did they get the message? It should have been loud and clear, but was it?

These close disciples may have thought that they knew Jesus' teaching, and they knew how to pray, and how to be faithful, and how to be just, and what the Kingdom of God was all about. They had heard it all, and they figured they were mature in their faith. They weren't like these other people who didn't know anything, who hadn't spent significant time with Jesus. In their self-satisfied spirituality, they thought they were already fulfilling the expectations of their Lord and of God. They had no idea that they had been missing the point, that their confidence in their self-perception was misplaced and inadequate. They had not been listening after all, and quite frankly, God was totally fed up. God yelled at them.

Yes, they may have been with Jesus, and they may have heard him preach and teach, and seen him heal and feed and bring hope. But despite all of that, it doesn't mean the disciples were listening. It doesn't mean that they truly understood what Jesus was all about.

It might be hoped that the leading disciples who accompanied Jesus to the mountaintop would also bring down from the mountaintop a new perspective on Jesus' ministry, having been awakened to their own need to get on the ball. However, they fail to show any change; the very next story has the disciples look silly and useless as they fail to drive out a demon. Like Moses, Jesus' experience coming off the mountain was rather disheartening.

Moses and Jesus ascended the mountaintop and afterward would present themselves and their mission in distinctive ways. (Peter was probably very happy just to get off that mountain.)

As far as the people of God getting the mountaintop message, clearly that will take some long term efforts. God's people are one hot mess in both cases. Moses and Jesus will have short time periods remaining for them to work with their particular people of God to get them straight. They will rely on their closest disciples to keep things moving forward, to keep the message of hope, promise, and new life in front of God's people.

There is one more message that comes from all of this. In both instances, we see God sharing his glory, his power, and his light with the ones who have been chosen as his servants. God is active and invested in their ministry with God's people.

God is doing God's best to lead the sinful faithful into their new life, toward God's Kingdom promise that awaits. God can be the overbearing mother whose attention is smothering, or the angry father who has heard enough nonsense to last a lifetime. Regardless, God is there, ready to provide guidance and sustenance in every season, to us and to those for whom we care deeply.

May we praise God and give thanks for the disruption of our lives with a message from the mountaintop. God lifts us to the heights and doesn't abandon us to the abyss. May we, too, shine with radiance from the glory of God who simply asks us to listen and pay attention to what's important.