

WORSHIPPING UPON THE MOUNTAIN

The Transfiguration of Jesus Year B

2 Kgs. 2:1-12; Ps. 50:1-6; 2 Cor. 4:3-6; Mk. 9:2-9

Tannum 14/02/2021

What is it about mountaintops that we find so attractive? I'm not talking about the mountain climber who climbs a mountain just because it's there, but the rest of us. Most people seem to have a special feeling for mountains. We talk about the "Mountain Top Experience" don't we? But what is it that makes those experiences so special? Is it because we still have an understanding of the universe that puts God up in heaven, so going up a mountain feels like we're getting closer to God? Well, it might be, but it isn't mere altitude that does it. I've been up in an aeroplane at 30,000 ft. looking down at the ground and I didn't have that sense of being nearer to God—except, perhaps if the plane had had any problems—then perhaps I would feel *very* near to God.

Is it the feeling of being separated from our normal world—of the ruggedness of the mountain and the wildness of the surrounds that reminds us of our place in a world made by God not by humankind? Or is it that as we stand on the mountain top we can look down and see the world laid out before us and realise just how small our part of the world is by comparison with the larger reality?

The mountaintop has always played an important part in human spirituality, whether it's the Celtic mystics who built their standing stones on hilltops, or the Hindu holy man who sits alone on the hill and meditates day and night. And it's certainly true in the Jewish and Christian religious experience. The mountaintop was the place where God showed Abraham the land of Canaan and promised him all he could see in every direction. It was the place where he was taken to test his faith with the sacrifice of Isaac. It was the place where Moses first encountered God and where, later, he was given the 10 Commandments. It was the place where Moses was given a glimpse of God, where Elijah was taken for reassurance that God was still with him, and here in this passage today from Mark's account of the gospel, we find Jesus going up a mountain to meet with God.

There is a true story of a 33-year-old truck driver by the name of Larry Walters who was sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard one day wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time nor the money nor the opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminium chair—the kind with the webbing and the rivets, the kind many people have.

One day Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung an air rifle over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He lifted off in his lawn chair expecting to climb a couple of hundred feet over his

neighbourhood. But instead he shot up 11,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport. When later asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: “Well, you can’t just sit there.” When asked if he was scared, he answered, “Yes...wonderfully so.”

In today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus takes three of his disciples—Peter, James and John—on a journey to the top of a mountain—a journey they would never forget. There, we are told, he was transfigured before them—his whole appearance changed into some kind of glorious radiance—something brighter than New Omo. His divinity shined like the sun through his humanity. Then all of a sudden, standing there with Jesus were Moses and Elijah, both giving witness to the ministry of Jesus.

Now when you think about it, neither Moses nor Elijah were strangers to mountains either. God had met with both of them on top of mountains. Now, here they were talking with the transfigured Jesus. Luke, in his account, gives us a little more information. He tells us that they were talking about Jesus’ “exodus”—his departure, his death—which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Who better to speak of an exodus than Moses? Moses had led Israel on their exodus—their departure from Egypt through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. And it was on the mountain that Elijah was mysteriously transported into heaven. Today’s readings invite us to make the connection between Moses and Elijah on the one hand and Jesus on the other—between prophecy and fulfilment—between law and grace. Moses is the mediator of the old covenant, Jesus the mediator of the new and eternal covenant. And both events appealed for change in the lives of people.

It was on the mountain called Sinai that God revealed Himself to be *their* God—the God of the Hebrew people. There they sacrificed their burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. There they heard the words of the covenant. There on Sinai, the mountain of God’s glory, Israel fellowshiped with God. And on that mountain God was present with His Word in the Ten Commandments.

Under the New Covenant God reveals Himself for us, in his mercy, through Jesus Christ. On the Mount of Transfiguration, we see in Him, the glory of God. We’re told, “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (17:2) The glory of God dwelling in Jesus—hidden until now behind the weakness of his humanity. Here was Jesus as He had never appeared before to His disciples—Jesus in all His radiant glory—together with Moses and Elijah.

And Peter’s all excited. “This is great,” Peter blurts out true to form. He wants to stay. The last time there was a mountain like this, Moses stayed for forty days and nights. They would need tents, Peter figured—three of them—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Now we’re not really sure just what he had in mind. Mark gives us some insight when he says that he didn’t know what he was talking about. But before he could

make a start on his new building program, Peter is interrupted by the voice of God coming out of the shining cloud, who identifies the true tabernacle or tent that is already there in their midst.

Human tents will not be necessary. No longer will the glory of God be restricted to some physical building or place. “This is my Son, the Beloved; *listen* to him!” (my emphasis) So often in our busyness for God, we’re so concerned with doing things that we fail to stop and listen. We think that by being busy we’re achieving our goals in mission. We think that by being busy God is pleased—but as is the case so often, we do not stop to listen.

“Listen to him.” The voice of the Father directs our ears to the Son whom He loves. Listen to Him. Listen to Jesus, because the words He speaks are from the Father. The writer to the Hebrews said, “In many and various ways, God spoke to the people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days, he has spoken to us by His Son.” Listen to Him, the Father says. Listen to Him for He alone has the words of eternal life. Listen to Him, for His words are Spirit and they are life. Listen to Him because He is the Father’s word of love for you.

There are many voices today clamouring to be heard. Voices crying out, “Listen to me, listen to me.” Voices in the media and on the television. Voices seeking your vote, your business, your life. And if you don’t listen—if you try to turn them off—they become louder and more insistent. The voice of the Father from the cloud on the mountain says listen to my Son, Jesus. Hear him.

Matthew tells us that by this time, the disciples’ faces are now flat on the ground. This is more glory than they are able to bear. There is nothing more to say. No more tents to build. No more, “It’s good for us to be here.” Now it’s faces to the ground. And Jesus comes to them, gently and humbly, and He lifts them up. It’s what Jesus does best, coming to us, reaching down to us, raising us up. “Arise,” He says, “Do not fear.” Gone now are Moses and Elijah. Gone are the voice of the Father and the bright cloud. Now there is only Jesus, and *only* Jesus was all the disciples needed, for with Jesus comes everything.

Jesus dusts the disciples off and leads them off this mountain and on to the next one. “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead,” He said. You see, there is one more mountain for Jesus to climb—the mountain called Calvary. On *that* mountain, the words from the voice in the cloud are brought to their true fulfilment. “Truly this was the Son of God.” On that mountain, Jesus comes into the fullness of His glory. On that mountain the blood of the new covenant is poured out. On that mountain, Jesus accomplishes His exodus—our deliverance from sin and death. “It is finished.” On that mountain Jesus dies for the sin of the world. The cross is His greatest glory, Calvary His greatest mountain.

Where is Jesus now in His glory? We too may wonder that sometimes, as we wander through the wilderness, that life often seems to be to us. Where is the Lord pitching his tent today that he might dwell with us?

Jesus locates Himself where He has promised to be for us? In the Word of Baptism—in the Word of forgiveness—in the bread and wine, His body and blood, given and shed for you—in His Church, where Word and Sacrament are being shared. Through these things Jesus continues to pitch his tent—to dwell with His redeemed people, with you and me.

There are no other sacrifices for sin other than Jesus' death on the cross. There is nothing we can offer God that will atone for the mess of our lives. Jesus offers *His* life—and His *transfiguration* tells us that *His* death is big enough to cover us all. Our sin is buried forever in His death. Our life is now hid in him. His transfiguration signals change. No more could Peter, James and John hide from the reality of Jesus' mission and what it would cost him. In their mountaintop experience, they have seen Jesus in a different light—a light shining with the glory of God.

What remains then, is our own transfiguration—the change that comes when we see the glory of the transfigured Jesus and listen to him. It's an experience that should see our faces in the dust—with nothing to say and nothing to build—there to be lifted up by Jesus. And, like Peter, James, and John on the mountain, when we look up we will see no one except Jesus.

Larry Walters will never be the same again after his trip to the mountain in his lawn chair. He has seen things and felt things that will shape the way he lives the rest of his life.

It was the same with Peter, James and John. Up on that mountain they had been given nothing less than a glimpse into the future. They saw past the suffering and death of Jesus, which he had predicted a few days before—past their doubts—past their fears. For one brief shining moment God had cracked open the door to the end of time and they had seen how history would be worked out—both their own history and the history of the whole world. And they would never be the same again.

And as Jesus leads us from the joys of one mountaintop experience, down through the challenges of the dark valleys and on to the next mountaintop experience, as we too experience the glory of God in Christ, we too will never be the same again. Should we be scared? Yes...wonderfully so.

To him be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.