

23 February 2020

The Problem with Mountains

Exodus 24:12-18; 32:7-14

Our scripture today is two parts of one story, the story of Israel at Sinai, the Mountain of God. We read first from Exodus chapter 24, verses 12-18:

¹²The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

So Moses disappeared alone into the consuming fire of God's presence, to receive the law. Moses had already delivered the ten commandments to the people, back in chapter 20, but now he was receiving the details. After forty days away, though, God changed the subject. We read Exodus 32, verses 7-10.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' ⁹The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

I'd like to talk a little bit this morning about mountains: specifically, why do we like them so much? We do, don't we? If you could vacation either in Aspen, Colorado, or Amarillo, Texas, which would you choose? And why is that? Okay, would you rather hike the Blue Ridge Mountains or the Trans-Kansas Hiking Trail? How many of you, when driving, have pulled over to take a picture of snowcapped mountains? And how many of you have slammed on the brakes, saying, "Whoa! I have got to get a shot of this South Dakota prairie! Even if it delays my arrival at the Mitchell Corn Palace!" I thought so. There's just something about mountains, isn't there? The desert and the prairie have their own beauty, but mountains represent something more to us: purity, majesty, strength, eternity. On a mountain, you feel above the day to day world. You can look out over the vistas below you, and everything else feels suddenly insignificant. Feeling inspired comes easier on a mountain, doesn't it? This has, of course, had predictable results in the world of faith. In all the cartoons, where do you find gurus? The top of mountains. And that's

based on reality. In every religion that has monasteries and convents and so on, those holy shrines tend to be built on precarious crags of high mountains. Those of us who don't have monasteries build our retreat centers and Christian camps on mountains. Mountains are where we go to experience God.

We find that in the Bible as well. Pilgrims to the Jerusalem temple sang about going up to Mount Zion. Elijah defeated the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. Jesus preached his greatest sermon on high ground – the Sermon on the Mount. (By the way, did you know that the Gospel of Luke has Jesus preaching most of that sermon in a valley? In Luke it's called the "Sermon on the Plain." How many of you have even heard of the "Sermon on the Plain"? I know, right? Who cares about a flatland sermon? Mountains are where it's at!) But of course the best example of a holy mountain comes in our reading from Exodus. Moses had first encountered God in a burning bush at the top of Mount Sinai, so upon leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses took them straight back to that mountain. There, with fire and thunder and smoke, God appeared to them and gave them the Ten Commandments – No other gods before me, no carved images, and so on. Having done that, God summoned Moses up to the top of the mountain for further instructions. Leaving Aaron in charge, Moses went back up the mountain of God.

There's a problem with mountains, though. As wonderful as your time up in the heights may be, as glorious as the experience of the presence of God might feel, as rewarding as it may be to gain a broader perspective on the sordid world below, your time up on the mountain doesn't stop that sordid world from going on as sordidly as usual. That leads us to our second reading, from Exodus 32, where God says to Moses, "As much as I hate to interrupt this time, I need to send you back down the mountain. Remember those commandments I gave the people? Especially ones about having no other gods and not making any carved images to worship? Well, you're not going to believe this, but . . . Honestly, Moses, these people! Sometimes I think I'd be better off starting over. Are you interested in being the new Abraham?" Moses talks God out of destroying Israel, then goes down the mountain to find the people worshipping a golden calf that his brother Aaron the high priest had obligingly made for them. ("Well, gee, Moses! You were gone a long time, and we didn't know if you were ever coming back! What else was I to do?") Sympathizing with God's irritation and maybe showing a little temper himself, Moses pulls down the calf, grinds it into dust, scatters it in the stream, and makes the people drink it.

Fast forward twelve hundred years to the time of Christ. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, when we remember a time that Jesus went up a mountain. He took only his inner circle – the disciples Peter, James, and John – and at the summit, he was transfigured in front of them, still himself but a shining, unstained, unwearied version of himself, standing with Moses and Elijah. If you remember the story, Peter offers to build huts for them so they can just stay up on the mountain forever and never go back down to the icky world down at the foot of the hill, the world of needy crowds and scheming priests and bickering disciples, but Jesus says, "No, we can't do that." He leads them down to the valley, where he is immediately met by crowd in uproar over a man who had brought his son to be healed but whom Jesus' disciples had failed to help, and now the man was frantic, the disciples busy making excuses, the crowd enjoying the

show, and the boy himself going into full Grand Mal seizure. “Welcome back, Jesus. Did you have a nice time at camp?”

You see the parallel to the Sinai story. No matter how glorious the mountaintop was, the world is still waiting. Spiritual mountaintops haven’t changed a whole lot since then either, and neither have the plains below. Like Moses, like Elijah, like Jesus, we sometimes have moments of glory, times when we are filled with the conviction that God is with us, that we are loved. At these moments, rare though they may be, we see how trivial and superficial our normal day-to-day world appears in comparison. These are wonderful mountaintop moments, and like Peter we’d love to just stay there, but we can’t. The trivial and superficial things still have to be done. We still have to clean the bathrooms, break up an argument between our kids for the thousandth time this week, complete and submit reports to the main office, shovel the driveway, deal with our toxic coworker, and so on. It seems that all we can do is try to retain some memory of the mountaintop to sustain us as we trudge through the valley of the shadow of overdue paperwork and dirty diapers.

That’s the message we normally give on Transfiguration Sunday – the message about having to come down eventually from the mountaintop to face the challenges of the “real” world – and it’s not wrong. But there is another perspective that we can take on the flatlands, those long dry stretches without divine comfort or inspiration. What if our goal were not to endure our daily trials now so that we can one day get back up the mountain and be free of all that frustration and drudgery? What if our goal were to find the mountain in the valley?

During my morning devotions right now, I am reading *The Imitation of Christ*, by a 15th century monk named Thomas à Kempis. Thomas has very little interest in mountaintop experiences. His view is that anyone can be virtuous and devout when they are filled with the overwhelming experience of God’s presence. So what? He writes,

Never depend too much on these feelings, for they may be rapidly changed to the opposite ... Progress in the spiritual life consists not so much in enjoying the grace of consolation, as in bearing its withdrawal with humility, resignation and patience, neither growing weary in prayer nor neglecting your other acts of devotion. Do willingly, and to the best of your ability and understanding, whatever lies in your power, and do not neglect your spiritual life because of any dryness or anxiety of mind (III, 8, pp. 101-102).

Faith is not truly measured by how often we go up the mountain, but rather by how steadily we trudge across the flatlands.

I spent much of the last week at a conference meeting where I heard about what is going on in the United Methodist Church from people who keep up with those things better than I do. As most of you are aware, almost exactly one year ago, a special meeting of the global United Methodist Church decided by a slim majority to double down on its exclusion of gay and lesbian clergy and prohibition of same-sex marriages. That meeting had been called to resolve the long-standing dispute over these issues in our denomination, but far from resolving the questions, that meeting only made it clear that no resolution was in sight. This May, another such global meeting will be held, at which various proposals will be considered. Most of those plans involve

breaking up the United Methodist Church in one way or another. Churches like ours, who have emphatically rejected the exclusiveness of that majority view, will probably end up a part of a smaller denomination than we've been used to. Some of the plans for division look less complicated than others, but make no mistake: all of them will be messy. Whatever happens at our general conference, we are looking at years to come of trudging through the swamplands of uncertainty and anxiety. I do not see many mountaintops on the immediate horizon.

Okay. We aren't called to the mountaintop, anyway. We are called to the valley where people are building idols out of gold. We are called to the foot of the mountain, where there are people who are suffering and helpless and afraid. Over the next few years we as a congregation have a chance to show that we will serve God and others through a time of dryness and anxiety, and we as a worldwide church have an opportunity to show how people who can no longer live together can still love. Maybe this split will be good for us; maybe we have to divide in order to get over our weird cultural memory of having once been big and rich and powerful and to remember that, before that time, Methodists were a radical movement of people wholly devoted to Christ. Maybe we've been on the mountain long enough, and it's time to go down to the valley of human need and spiritual darkness. That's where we're most likely to find Christ anyway.