

## Rocky Mountain High

Exodus 24:9-18

Matthew 17:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-19

*Please pray with me: God of awe and wonder, Jesus Christ of grace and truth, blessed Holy Spirit of power and life... we yearn for you. We long to be transformed by your truth and challenged by your presence. Shake us from our complacencies and startle us afresh with your Good News. And may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Mountains... places of cloud and thunder, awe and wonder, majesty and mystery. Mountains daunt us and inspire us, don't they? They beckon to us... draw us closer... call us to climb them. It's no coincidence, of course, that many of the most significant events throughout the Old and New Testaments occur on mountaintops. High up there, up there where the peaks scrape the sky and catch the clouds, we are clearly closer to heaven... This is universally understood—from Mt. Fuji to Ayres Rock, from Mt. Kailash to Mt. Shasta, from Mt. Nebo to Mt. Sinai to Mt. Hermon—all over the world, people know... those mountains are the intersection between heaven and earth... those thin places where we may expect to meet God... And today, scripture comes to us from the mountaintop.

David read to us from Exodus—and let us beware lest it sound so familiar to us that we say... Oh yeah, that's right. Moses went up the mountain to meet God. Can we be that blasé to the startling story of our faith? We know well—perhaps too well—the part where God called him up beyond the others and for forty days and forty nights all anyone can see is cloud and fire—the glory of the Lord settled on that mountain. These verses may be in our memory banks from Sunday School. But rarely do we read the verses that precede it—the surprising lines that have been strangely overlooked that tell us Moses and Aaron and Joshua and seventy others went up the mountain and they saw ..... the God of Israel. Under his feet was a pavement of sapphire stone, reflecting the heavens. And there and then, up on that mountain... Moses and Aaron and Joshua and seventy others stopped ... for a picnic .....

They shared a meal

—a little bread, some wine perhaps .....

...and they beheld God.....

And then... some 1200 years later... Jesus invites three of his friends to go with him up the mountain. Maybe they expected a casual hike through the countryside, a day's recreation. But listen for God's words to you today from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 17:

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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." 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!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

The transfiguration. This story rolls around each year... the last Sunday, before Lent begins. We've traveled through the season of Epiphany—through which the light of Christ shines to confirm that that baby born in Bethlehem... just what? 6 weeks ago? is truly the Son of God, the Beloved, in whom God is well pleased. And it all culminates today, on this mountaintop, where—glorious and amazing, beyond words and terrifying, Jesus is transfigured from the carpenter's boy, itinerant teacher, friend of fishermen and prostitutes and tax collectors, into a figure that shines with a radiance like the sun itself...

Tomorrow, he will set his face toward Jerusalem....

and come Ash Wednesday we will follow...

follow him through Lent to the fate he and we know too well.

But today... today we have dazzling clothes and a brilliant face, and forebears in faith who verify that Jesus stands with those who liberate from slavery and those who challenge the political and religious powers that be; Jesus walks in the shining light of God's eternal truth.

It's a weird story.

I shake my head over these stories I get to preach. Today's text is undeniably a weird story. What do I do with this other-worldly, bizarre description of Jesus glowing, and Peter offering to pitch a tent, and Moses and Elijah wandering around? What do I do with a voice that bellows out of the clouds while grown men collapse in terror? What do I do with this mountaintop experience? Now, I'm not sure, but I suspect that this is not something that happens to you on a regular basis.... Let's face it, this is weird story.

In wrestling over the weird stories of our faith, I am reminded of a telephone conversation I had with a friend of mine a few years ago. She's a pastor too, so when her nephew left the church of his baptism and confirmation to become a Mormon and prepared to fly off to the Congo to do his required two years of missionary service, her brother called her to say... *please!* Talk to him! Persuade him to come back to the church! She spent several weeks in conversation with him, talking with him about what he believed and why Mormonism had attracted him. I remember that she shared with me the things she had learned from her nephew about the Mormon faith, and I said to her, "That is so weird! Who could actually believe that stuff?" ... There was this small silence on the other end of the line... until she said, "Marjorie, You believe in the saving act of Christ through the Crucifixion, don't you? You believe in the Resurrection, don't you? You believe in the abiding, indwelling presence of the living God, don't you?"... and today, I could almost hear her saying, "You believe in the Transfiguration, don't you?"

Hmmm... the weird stories of our faith... They just seem to lay themselves open to be attacked by those who wish to discredit Christianity, or God, or any faith at all. Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens all line up to refute our startling stories of faith ... the latest perhaps being a new book called *Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains Why the Arguments for God Just Don't Add Up*. But this is nothing new. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome, Suetonius derided Christians as "a set of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition." And clearly, the apostle Peter was still battling against the dismissal of his mountaintop experience decades later when he wrote these words in the letter we have preserved as 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter in the New Testament:

*We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have this prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."*

Poor Peter! I feel for him! Have you ever had a mountaintop experience, and tried to tell someone else about it? I am somehow reminded of John Denver whose song, *Rocky Mountain High* was banned because the Federal Communications Commission thought it was promoting drug abuse. Remember it?

*He was born in the summer of his 27<sup>th</sup> year,  
coming home to a place he'd never been before.  
Left yesterday behind him, **you might say he was born again,**  
Might say he found the key to every door.*

*Oh the Colorado Rocky Mountain high,  
I've seen it raining fire in the sky  
You can talk to God and listen for the divine reply,  
Rocky Mountain high.<sup>a</sup>*

As Denver explained to Congress, he was just trying to express the elation and celebration of life he experienced at witnessing the wondrous Perseid meteor shower on a moonless, cloudless night when there are so many stars that you cast a shadow from the starlight. Clearly, he said, they'd never been to the Rocky Mountains. They just couldn't understand.

And you? ... Have you ever encountered that bizarre, disorienting juxtaposition of the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary..... or is it the ordinary in the midst of the extraordinary? It's my belief that these experiences are all around us, when the veil flutters wide and we catch a glimpse of glory, transfiguring our reality into the sacred, holding open to us the realm of God breaking in to our worldly experience. I think often we are afraid to see. I think that's one reason why we keep so busy, why we barricade ourselves with technology that effectively cocoons us safely within a web of noise and distraction that isolates us even as it connects us to the wrong frequency.

You see, it's not an easy task to encounter the powerful truth of Christ like Peter did, and express that mountain top experience—that ever-present divine reality—to those who walk in the valleys below. Down in the trenches, other-worldly dimensions are not easy to translate to a world that strives so hard to keep everything matter-of-fact and comprehended and controlled. It seems that some today are frankly terrified at the possibility that maybe... just maybe... the arguments for God will never fit nicely into a mathematical formula that all adds up. Frankly, I find the opposite more terrifying—a god who does...a god who can be comprehended, apprehended, quantified and qualified and made to behave predictably according to the limits of my own imagination. That's terrifying.

These weird stories of our faith invite us to see and know, not clinically with eye and head, but faithfully, with heart and soul...to understand, as the poet put it, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God"<sup>b</sup> to a most disturbing degree. These stories are not there to encourage us to mountain top retreats of spiritual comfort or lofty security elevated above the fray. These stories point, not to fantasy or superstition, or cloistered religiosity, but to the truth that the world is invaded and imbued with a purpose and a power greater than ours that confronts us and demands that we respond.

Bishop Willimon tells the story of a young man who came to him seeking counsel. He had experienced a number of coincidences and weird happenstances, revelations and realizations that troubled him and he wanted Willimon's assurance that they were simply coincidences. But Willimon said to him, "Sounds to me like suspiciously like the voice of God. Sounds like he's invading your life and has something for you to do." And the young man said, "I was afraid of that."<sup>c</sup> He was afraid... and ain't that the voice of truth?

For much as we long to know God, long to see him face-to-face, we are deep down terrified at the possibility that we might indeed encounter the risen Christ in our midst... feel his demanding love... hear his invitation to live fully into your truest, best, God-designed life ... to follow in the transformational path that Jesus walks... No wonder the disciples faint in fear. But Jesus comes to them, he touches them, and says... "Do not be afraid." And then he leads them back over the rocky road down the mountain, back into the hustle and bustle of the valley below, where the world was waiting, needing for them to get back to work.

I guess that's why we come here today... to practice what it's like to follow Jesus up the mountain top... to hear God's speak.... to catch again a glimpse of God's way and God's will in our world .....for a picnic of sorts, to share a meal together....a little bread, some wine, perhaps?..... so that we too may behold God... and maybe then be emboldened enough by the touch of Jesus to go back, back down this serene quiet little mountain into the heaving, heavy world in which we live, carrying our lamp into the dark until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in every heart.

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<sup>a</sup> *Rocky Mountain High*. Words by John Denver. Music by John Denver and Mike Taylor. 1973.

<sup>b</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, Hopkins Poems and Prose. Alfred A Knopf, New York. 1995.

<sup>c</sup> Will Willimon. *It's a Fearful Thing to be with Jesus*. Pulpit Resource: February 3, 2008.