

“At the Top”

Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-9; Second Peter 1: 16-21

The expression “mountain-top experience” is an old one, but it is still used a lot these days. According to one source, it means the transformation of a person’s heart. Another one puts it this way: “a spiritual high,” an important, meaningful encounter with God.

In the Bible, these experiences really did happen on the top of a mountain. Moses went to the top of a mountain to be given the Ten Commandments by God. And, as it says in the Scripture from Matthew, this event in Jesus’ life, the Transfiguration, happened on a mountain top. The verses in Second Peter refer to that very experience as one which the writer, Peter himself, witnessed.

To begin with, let’s look at that word, transfiguration. Now that one is not one we use much in ordinary conversation. It means that a person’s appearance is “changed to having a non-earthly appearance.” (Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.)

In the Scripture from Matthew, the person was Jesus, and his appearance “changed from the inside out. . .Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light.” (The Message version of the Bible)

Just seeing Jesus’ appearance change this way must have really been something for the disciples with him, Peter and James and John. The thing is, this happened right before their eyes. They were there. It was outside, on a mountain. It was not a matter of special effects in a movie, or stage-lighting, or theatrical makeup.

Having this happen was only the beginning of the mountain-top experience. The second part came along: “Suddenly there appeared to them [that is, the three disciples] Moses and Elijah, talking to him.” Or, as the Message version puts it: “. . .they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him [Jesus]

That was another special part. Moses and Elijah were great heroes of the Jewish faith. Moses represented the Law, and Elijah represented the Prophets. When put together, the expression “the law and the prophets” meant the entire Old Testament, which was every bit of the Scriptures then. (Jerome Commentary on the Bible.)

So, there they were, Moses and Elijah, the long-dead religious heroes, talking with Jesus. This added to the wonder of the whole experience.

Matthew's account of this doesn't say what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about, but it must have been very interesting and important.

Then, at that part, Peter spoke up: "Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?" (Message) Other versions of the Bible say "dwellings" or "booths" or "tents" instead of "memorials."

That was an error on Peter's part. One book says that, "Peter's error was two-fold. First, he wanted to control and domesticate the mystery by reducing it to ritual expression (the tents)." Tents or booths were part of the Jewish festival of booths. Also, it meant that Peter "saw Jesus as just another "man of God" on an equal level with Moses and Elijah." (Luke T. Johnson)

Or maybe he was trying to "preserve this moment of glory" (Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible, by Howard Clark Kee.) But of course, there was no way to preserve the special moment with anything a person could set up or build.

Still, this was not the end of this wondrous vision. The next part happened, and in my opinion it was the best part.

'While [Peter] 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!"

"The voice from the cloud pronounces correction to these errors [of Peter's], not only for the three disciples, but above all for . . . readers. First, Jesus is not like other prophets and [wonder-workers]: This is my beloved {or, unique} Son." Second, he will not be pinned down or controlled but himself leads the way: "Listen to *him*." If we are to learn what it means to be "with him" as a disciple, . . . we must listen to [and] look to Jesus only." (Johnson)

We understand that the voice speaking from the bright cloud is God Almighty. God was proclaiming Jesus to be God's own Beloved Son.

It says that at this point that the three disciples, Peter and James and John “fell to the ground because there were overcome by fear.” “They fell flat on their faces, scared to death.” (Message)

Well, sure they did. Who wouldn't? They had not understood much at all who Jesus was. Even though he had drawn them in, to be his disciples and friends, even though they had seen him work miracles, even though they had listened to his stories and teachings, they had not quite gotten it.

But now, this Transfiguration experience, this vision, this direct voice of God. It was too much for them, and it literally bowled them over and knocked them flat.

In a way, they had seen an “advance viewing of the risen Christ.” (Kee) What were they to do with it?

Jesus told them to keep the whole thing to themselves, until after his Resurrection. As far as we know, they did.

Still, what a thing to carry around, inside their heads and hearts and souls!

Yet, they continued on with Jesus and his other disciples, just as before. Peter, in particular, continued to say and do mistaken things. I can relate to that.

Maybe, what happened to Peter and James and John just had to soak into their souls a while. Maybe nothing but seeing and touching Jesus, their dear friend, after he had risen from the dead was what it took to convince them that yes

Jesus is God's Son.            Yes, Jesus is beloved by God.    Yes, Jesus is the one to listen to, to be with, and to obey.

Just like Peter, we can't bend Jesus into what we might prefer, or what we might understand better. We can't limit Jesus, and that would be awful anyway. We would not want a limited Savior.

We can't talk Jesus into being on our side and seeing things our way. Jesus is ALREADY pulling for us, and understand us and knows us through and through—mistakes and all.

Above all, Jesus loves us and wants to work with us, and make us grow into the people God has designed us to be.

God's words, coming from that bright cloud, were and are, just exactly what we need—as much or even more than those three disciples needed.

Let's all do our very best to listen to God's beloved Son, Jesus. Amen

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, February 23, 2020.