

“You went to the Mountaintop? What did you bring me?”

Each of the Gospel lessons we have heard over the past six Sundays since the Day of the Epiphany has been intended to show us how Jesus was revealed to the world as the Son of God. Whether it is in the arrival of the Magi to worship him, his miracles, or the demons who call out to him as the Son of the Most High. Of all of the stories we have heard this one might seem to the modern reader to be the most outlandish. Yet, the symbolism in this story may also be the most important in to those steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures as Mark’s first-century listeners would have been. There is layer upon layer in this story that reveals to us who Jesus is and how we are to view him. Indeed, the transfiguration may be the least of the revelatory aspects of this pericope¹. Let’s peel back some of the layers and see what this story is telling us about Jesus of Nazareth.

First of all Jesus goes up a mountain. Mountains are where Jewish figures have liminal experiences. That is, mountain tops are thin places where heaven and earth are physically and metaphorically closer for humans. Abraham climbed mountains several times and was near to God. Moses especially was nearer to God at Mt. Horeb/Sinai where he actually meets with God and receives instructions and the Ten Commandments. Elijah also goes up a mountain to escape his pursuers and hides in a cave. Elijah experiences thunder, lightning and earthquake, but he experiences God in a still small voice.

Not only are mountains closer to heaven and thus God, but transformative things happen on mountaintops. When Abraham goes up the mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac as God had commanded him, no sooner does he strap the boy down on the altar that an angel appears to stay his hand. He is then commanded to sacrifice a ram that is caught in underbrush nearby.

As I mentioned before Moses goes up the mountain to encounter God. He received the Ten Commandments there. He also sees God pass by although only the backside because seeing God’s face would be so overwhelming for a human he would die. Still when Moses comes down off the mountain his countenance is radiant due to his proximity to God. The Hebrews ask him to wear a veil so they can bear to look at him.

Elijah after experiencing God on the mountain defeats six-hundred prophets who serve Ahab and Jezebel. He is later transported into heaven with the expectation that he will return to earth to announce the coming of the Messiah.

When Jesus ascends the mountain with Peter, James and John all of this is in the mind of the first-century Jewish listener. Before Jesus even gets to the top of the mountain this is the subtext of the story. When he reaches the top he is transfigured, that is he is radiant like Moses. Not only that but then he is seen talking with Moses and Elijah (remember he is the one who will presage the coming Messiah).

The disciples are dumbstruck as well they should be. James and John don’t seem to know what to do. Peter in his fumbling way stammers out that they should make little booths to commemorate the event. To say the least, a rather inadequate response to this transformative moment.

But it is not over, for just in case the duh-sciples² don’t can’t figure out what is going on a cloud comes over the mountaintop and a voice intones, “This is my son the beloved. Listen to him.” If there was any question about Jesus’ authority the voice from the cloud lays that to rest.

¹ Pericope/pə'rikəpē/—a fancy word that means an extract from a text, especially a passage from the Bible.

² My New Testament professor Dr. Frances Taylor Gench said that Jesus’ followers in Mark always seemed a bit clueless so she referred to them as the “duh-sciples.”

When this is all passed, Jesus walks down the mountain with what I expect were jelly-legged disciples. As they return to the normal world Jesus tells them to keep mum about the experience for now.

In spiritual circles there is a phrase used to describe extraordinary spiritual experiences. That phrase is “mountaintop experience.” The conventional wisdom is that one cannot exist solely on mountaintop experiences. That is, sooner or later we have to return to the regular world where we try to integrate the mountaintop experience with the rest of our life. We are to use the mountaintop experience to inform how we live day-to-day. Now I have had some transcendent spiritual experiences, but I have never experienced anything quite as dramatic as what is described in today’s reading. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Peter, James and John to have to process what they saw and heard on the mountaintop and they could not tell anyone?

But perhaps even more remarkable, is that Jesus went up the mountain, and having had those remarkable experiences came down again. Rather than stay on the mountaintop he chose to return to society. He chose to return to a world that was not full of people like Moses and Elijah, but full of people like you and me. He also returns knowing full well that people like us would turn against him and shout the horrifying words, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

He could have stayed on that mountaintop basking in the love of the Father and talking religion and theology with the ancient heroes and wise men of his faith. But he did not. As we say each week in the Nicene Creed, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” We could easily paraphrase that in the case of this story to say, “For us and for our salvation he came down from the mountaintop.”

What may be the most wondrous aspect of all is that the one who could have taken the easier road of adulation, fame, and safety chose instead to push the envelope, to proclaim that all of that was nothing compared to the love of God. Additionally, that God’s love was worth risking everything for, even death, death on a cross.³ He could have been the prosperity gospel preacher of his day and had a comfortable life, but that is not what he chose to do. Instead he humbled himself to show us that humility is not demeaning, but empowering. He loved even his enemies, the ones who killed him, to show us that there is more power in love than in armies and weapons. He chose death not to be a victim, but to reveal to us that “it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Yes, all those pretty words in the prayer of St. Francis that we read last week are about something real. They are poetry, but not just poetry. They are words of life that can guide our everyday actions in order that we too might live a righteous and life-giving life.

St. Francis was not a learned man or a particularly smart man, but he inspired and still inspires people to live a Christ-like life for the very reason that he was not remarkable in any way except in his faith in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We would do well to emulate St. Francis the little man who was not very good at anything but loving God.

We would do well in the coming days of Lent and Easter to pray his prayer and seek to live it verse by verse. Let us once again turn to page 833 in the Book of Common Prayer and pray together

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.⁴

³ Philippians 2:8

⁴ The Book of Common Prayer, The Episcopal Church, USA©1979, page 833.