



## **“Coming Down Off the Mountain”**

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### **Scripture (CEB):**

#### **Matthew 17:1-9, 14-16**

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. <sup>2</sup> He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

<sup>3</sup> Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. <sup>4</sup> Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good that we’re here. If you want, I’ll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!” <sup>6</sup> Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with fear.

<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead.”

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man met Jesus. He knelt before him, <sup>15</sup> saying, “Lord, show mercy to my son. He is epileptic and suffers terribly, for he often falls into the fire or the water. <sup>16</sup> I brought him to your disciples, but they couldn’t heal him.”

### **Sermon:**

Mountains are unlike any other places in the world. I grew up on the front range of the Colorado Rockies, and we never got tired of looking up into the mountains at their beauty, or going deep among them and hiking, skiing, climbing, and camping among them.

But mountains are also wild, and dangerous. Anapurna and Everest in Nepal's Himalayas, the Matterhorn in Switzerland, the spiky peaks of the Grand Tetons in Wyoming; the dead can be found on all those peaks. Take care when you go...

Mountains, scholars of religion tell us, are umbilicals to the gods, places of connection with majesty and divinity. High on a mountain one is closer to the realm of the eternal, and it is never safe, or simple, among the realms of the gods...

- Zeus and his companions lived on Mount Olympus, remember?
- Moses met the Lord God and received the commandments, on a mountaintop wreathed in clouds. (Exodus 19)
- Elijah dueled the priests of the god Baal, on Mount Carmel, and it was there that Yahweh consumed the offering on Elijah's altar with fire so intense that literally nothing was left. (1 Kings 18:20-39)
- It is on a mountain that Jesus speaks of the blessings, the beatitudes, to his followers. (Matt. 5)

And here we are again, on a mountain, wreathed in mystery and clouds.

Jesus, and a few of his companions, are on a mysterious mountain, to this day, no scholars can definitively say which mountain in Israel is the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured. (Driving around on a tour bus, they will say, it might be that one, or that one, or that one.)

But it doesn't matter anyway...when the transcendent moment comes, there is no promise that it will occur again, nor can you count on the same spot.

Jesus is up there on that peak, and his disciples follow him and see him in a wholly new way, transfigured and terrifying, unified with the Divine, companions of giants in the faith, the Son of the Most High God who declares Joy in Jesus...but it doesn't last.

Yes, they hear the voice saying "this is my son, the Beloved", and they fall to the ground and cower there in fear as they are surrounded by glory and mystery.

Yes, what they thought they knew about Jesus, is stripped away in brilliance and in power...but it doesn't last.

Jesus comes to them, and comforts them with a touch and says "do not fear"...and when they look up it is just to see the face of their friend, Jesus. There are no strange messengers of old, no Moses no Elijah. There is no shattering voice from the heavens.

Just their buddy Jesus, telling them to get up. And then, they have to hike down the mountain again.

The Buddhists have a saying: before enlightenment, you chop wood, you haul water. With enlightenment, there is no wood, there is no water, all is one. After enlightenment, once again, you chop wood, you haul water.

Or, as we youth ministers would tell the teenagers after a life-altering weekend retreat experience, “it doesn’t last”.

The “high” of a spiritual experience is just that, a high point.

And we still have to hike down the mountain, away from the place of transfiguration, of new awareness, of wonder, of glory.

Jesus heads down the mountain to take care of a sick child, to teach, to struggle, to face evil, to die at the hands of evil.

Moses had to go down the mountain and lead the people, stubborn, confused, ridiculous people...right up to his death.

Elijah went down his mountain and ended up a lonely prophet running for his life away from his enemies.

What matters (to me at least), is that you know more of God and more of who you are when you come down that mountain, when you leave that fantastic unitive experience.

1. You know something of the beauty and mystery of God, and you know that you are Beloved of God.
2. You know you are not alone, the giants of faith and hope who have come before, they stand with you, they encourage you.
3. You have friends, even if they are scared, they are there for you, too. They may even offer to build you a shrine!
4. And you know, that sooner or later, you will have to head on down.

So, if you have a “mountaintop experience” of awakening, of encounter, of spiritual enlightenment...you cannot demand it to stay.

And this is also true: like Jesus’ addressing the frightened disciples with the gentlest of touch; any truly spiritual experience is one of awe, and also of love. The experience of God is not the experience of terror, of violence, of fear. Never that.

It may happen but once, it may be years of waiting, it may seem “late” to come to you...but the mountaintop experience, as far as I can tell from my own experience and from the stories of the saints of the past...the mountaintop experience is filled with love.

Whether it is Teresa of Avila, who prayed for 13 years before she ever felt the presence of God, or Teresa of Calcutta who experienced it once in her life...it is strong enough to change the course of your life. Strong enough to be trusted.

But you cannot demand it to stay.

Climb back down the mountain, and wash your hands, and get on back to work.

As Jesus knew, there is always real need beyond the high of the mountain.

There is need for compassion; for the epileptic boy, and his heartbroken father.

There is the work of healing and restoring and renewing to be done.

As we well know from the story of Jesus, the work can be hard, and the enemies of healing may attack you...but the experience of the mountain-top will strengthen and comfort you.

Try not to forget. Don't shake your head and say, “it was just a dream”.

It may in fact be the most life altering, most holy, most uplifting and transfiguring moment on the mountaintop of life.

And it can change you if you are willing, and the trajectory of your life.

Especially when you come down from that high point, there will be work, and the old messages seeking to worm their way in and undo the truth of the mountain.

Don't let them!

Trust the beauty and awe, trust the presence of true friends, trust the love, trust the holiness and mystery of God, however God comes into your life; coming to you upon the mountain in a transcendent experience, and coming to you in the ordinariness of life after you come down from the mountain-top experience.

May you be held always and may you always know in your heart, even in the most ordinary of days at the bottom of the mountain; the awesome, the powerful, the Mysterious, Love of God!

Amen.