

## **WHAT HAPPENS IN THE MOUNTAINS ...**

**Exodus 24:12-18 / Matthew 17:1-9**

I love to hike in the high mountains and one of my favorite places in the world to do that is *Rocky Mountain National Park*. There is an acclimating hike up to *Flattop Mountain* of which I am very fond. An acclimating hike gets you accustomed to breathing at high altitude where the air becomes “thinner” the higher you go. Such a hike is “easy” enough so that when you notice having breathing issues, or become nauseous or develop a headache, you can turn around quickly and descend before you develop a full-blown case of altitude sickness ... which is not a good thing.

To get to the summit of *Flattop Mountain* measuring 12,300 feet, you start at *Bear Lake*, at around 9,500 feet. You wind your way through groves of aspens until you clear the forrest and step into the open tundra where trees give way to fir bushes pressed to the ground by fierce winds, grasses, and moss-covered rock. Right before the path turns to bare rock entirely, there is a ledge and a granite wall with an

embedded plaque that reads something like this: “At this altitude rain, snow and fog can appear out of nowhere anytime. Proceed with extreme caution.” The plaque may as well be framed by blinking lights aided by sirens, saying, “If you move on when the weather turns, you are crazy! Turn around and live!” And, as a matter of fact, many hikers, even experienced ones, have walked off that ledge in the fog and needlessly lost their lives.

It is remarkable that neither Moses nor Jesus take the time to acclimate for their trek up the highest of all mountains. No, they were not preparing to climb *Mount Everest*. They were getting ready to “enter into the mountain of God.” As we read in the *Book of Exodus*, “Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up onto the mountain of God. Moses went up onto the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The 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.” The writer of the *Gospel of Matthew* tells us, “Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led

them up a high mountain, by themselves. [And] while Jesus was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them.”

But while Moses and Jesus—accompanied by their trusted friends Joshua, Peter, James and John—forge ahead to meet God face-to-face in the high mountain, the biblical writers know that you and I are not ready to follow them. He or she knows that they need take you and me on an acclimating hike, metaphorically speaking. So they tell us these two stories in order for us to get acquainted with the spiritual air that gets thinner the closer we move toward God.

And lest we forget how dangerous an encounter with the living God can be, these stories provide for us a proverbial plaque with flashing lights and sirens that says: “Proceed with extreme caution and at your own peril!” “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites,” we read in Exodus. Matthew’s Gospel tells us, “Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud 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.”

Have you ever been in such a “thin” place? Have you ever been in a situation where an impending decision felt like a mountain much too high to climb? Where you felt ill-equipped to make such a lofty and dangerous ascent? Or where you were too afraid to simply set one foot in front of the other because you could not see the path laid out before you? Did you have a guide to show you the way or good friends to walk with you no matter what it took? Such places and situations are scary because we never know how our decisions will turn out precisely and because we never know exactly where and when the journey ends.

So whatever happens exactly in the mountains of our lives and on the mountain of God we do not know and we will probably never know. We are not privy to God’s conversation with Moses. And we don’t know what happened between God and Jesus on the holy mountain, either. But there are a few things we do know.

For one, if we lose our nerve, things usually don't turn out very well. When Moses was on that mountain for "forty days and forty nights," the Israelites lost their patience, built a golden calf, and turned to idol worship. Bad idea! Really, really bad idea! When the disciples were blinded by the light of Jesus's transfiguration, they wanted to cover up their fears with business. "Hey, let's build stuff!" But Jesus rebuked them saying, "Stop it, stop it, stop it! And, by the way, don't tell anyone about what you have just witnessed."

We also know that what happens on God's mountain does not stay on God's mountain. While the encounters between Moses, Jesus, and God remain shrouded in mystery, the results of these encounters did not remain hidden. They changed human history. Moses hauled two tablets of stone down God's mountain, which contained teachings and instructions on how to build and maintain a flourishing community. Peter, James and John came down God's mountain with Jesus having been told that he was God's beloved who can always be trusted. And that he would be the one to be raised from the dead.

This coming week, we will face once again the Christian Church's main ascent to God's holy mountain as we remember and re-enact Jesus's journey to the ultimate encounter with God on the cross. The plaque which says we are entering the danger zone at our own risk is the sign we will receive on Ash Wednesday. We will be once again marked with the ashen sign of the cross on our foreheads with the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This doorway into Lent, the 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, also functions as our "acclimating hike" as we accompany Jesus on the long arduous road to Jerusalem, and then to the cross.

What happened between Jesus and God on the cross will forever be shrouded in mystery, just as Moses's encounter with God in the cloud and Jesus's encounter with God on the mount of the transfiguration were shrouded in mystery. However, what happened on the cross did not stay on the cross. Jesus's death and resurrection did not merely change human history. It changed all of life for the benefit of God's good creation—from this life into life eternal.

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

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