

## **“Mountain-top experiences”**

**Sermon - Gregor Henderson**

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

Mountains feature as special and sacred places in just about every human culture and religion. Mt Fuji has a special place for the Shinto religion in Japan, as does Mt Koya-sam for Japanese Buddhists. In China there are 22 Taoist temples on Mt Tai Shan, and Mt Emei is sacred to Chinese Buddhists. In Bali there's Mt Agung, holy for Hindus, and in North Korea there's Mt Paektu, a special and holy place for all Koreans. In remote Tibet Mt Kailash is holy for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains - almost ecumenical! In Peru there's Machu Picchu and several other high places sacred to the Incas.

So it's no surprise that the Bible also features many mountain experiences. There's Mt Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God; Mt Nebo where Moses and the people of Israel looked across the Jordan to the promised land; Mt Zion, the high point of Jerusalem close to the Jerusalem temple mount; there's Jesus' sermon on the mount in Galilee; and today, at the northernmost point of Jesus' journeying there's the Mount of Transfiguration, believed to be Mt Hermon or one of its foothills on the border between Lebanon and Syria, although claims are also made for Mt Tabor, not far from Nazareth.

(Over the centuries the Christian faith has acted consistently with other great faiths of the world, in seeking to build temples and altars on mountain tops. There's the great statue of Christ the Redeemer above Rio de Janeiro; there's Mt Athos in Greece with its 20 monasteries and 1400 monks and not one woman among them; there's Catholic churches and convents throughout the world often located at the highest point of the town.)

So mountain-tops have always been places for encountering God. Initially, our ancient ancestors regarded mountains as the actual dwelling-places of the gods. There's an echo of that view in our reading today from Exodus when God says "Come up to me on the mountain". Then as religious understanding developed, the idea grew that mountains were the obvious visiting-places for gods to come to earth, they're closer to the heavens after all. There's an echo of that concept in the Transfiguration, with not only God, but Moses and Elijah too, visiting Jesus on the mountain-top, from heaven.

Nowadays the idea of the holiness of mountains lies chiefly in the fact that mountains provide an escape from the busyness of life and a reminder of the beauty and majesty of creation, which enable us to be more aware of the presence of God, to feel closer to God. And of course we speak metaphorically of mountain-top experiences - times so special, so inspiring, so full of God's presence and action, that in our language we liken them to the experiences of ancient people meeting God on their holy mountains.

The Transfiguration is complete confirmation of who Jesus is. With Jesus' baptism, his healings, his teaching, his feeding of thousands, his mastery of wind and storm, his authority, there was surely enough evidence to show Jesus was more than a mere human being. But the Transfiguration tops it off. It makes it absolutely clear that

Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets and God's beloved Son. It's literally a turning point in Jesus' ministry, it's as far north as Jesus goes, for after the mountain-top he turns and heads south, makes his way to Jerusalem where the valley of death awaits him - hostility, arrest, trial, execution.

Hopefully all of us have had a mountain-top experience or two - times when we've felt completely sure God is with us, times of great uplift and awe and joy, or perhaps of quiet assurance, certainty, serenity with God. But those times are not every day, they do not occur all the time; we also know times when it seems God is distant from us, unreachable, when difficulties assail us, we may even have felt abandoned by God.

This up-and-down-ness in our experience of God has something to do with Peter's reaction on the mountain top. Peter is so overawed by seeing Moses and Elijah with Jesus, and so wanting the glorious moment to continue, that he splutters out the idea of making three little shelters for them to stay in. Then when they hear God's voice speaking from the cloud Peter and James and John collapse in fear - it's too much! When it's all over they look up and see Jesus alone; Moses, Elijah and the voice of God are no longer present. And Jesus leads them down the mountain, down from inspiration and adoration and awe, down to the persistent hardworking effort of following Jesus.

But note one most glorious thing. Jesus does not leave them. The disciples are not abandoned. Moses died out near Mt Nebo, he never made it across the Jordan, and the people of Israel wept for 30 days. Elijah was whisked up into heaven in a fiery chariot, leaving grief-stricken followers bereft, 53 of them, including his successor Elisha. But Jesus does not disappear with Moses and Elijah. Jesus stays with his disciples. God's presence is no longer limited to mountain-tops and wilderness; Jesus, God's Son and living Word, stays.

No matter what difficulties we face, no matter how hard our daily lives may be, Jesus is with us. Not even crucifixion could end the life of Jesus with his people - the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit mean Jesus, Son of God, God himself, is always with us. As Jesus taught, God is Spirit, God is with us, anywhere, everywhere.

By all means go looking for those mountain-top experiences, know and enjoy the reality of God's presence. But know too that God is just as much with us in the valleys of hardship and anxiety and despair, for our understanding of God's presence in every part of God's creation comes from Jesus, who never left his followers alone.

To the glory of God. Amen.