

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

sermon digest

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Matthew 17:1-13

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April 3, 1968, on the night before his death in Memphis, Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a packed church. His sermon “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” was about Moses’ view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo and the judgment of God, “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there” (Deut. 34:4). King had a premonition about his death. He spoke of the threats on his life and put himself in the role of Moses: “He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.” King’s last public words before he was shot down the next day outside the Lorraine Motel were spoken from a mountaintop vision of the promise of God.

Like all of his sermons, King was speaking out of biblical imagery. There are no mountaintops around Memphis. His mountaintop was an experience rather than a place.

Mountaintops are where disciples experience God. The final, seventh Sunday of Easter is Ascension Sunday. According to Acts, the Ascension of Jesus forty days after Easter marks the transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth to the heavenly Christ enthroned as Lord at the right hand of God. After the Gospels, the Christian scriptures envisioned Jesus the Christ in heaven “at the right hand,” in the very being of God rather than on the mountain teaching disciples or in the city healing the sick.

At the turn of the last century, Albert Schweitzer opened a new chapter in the study of the Gospels in his search for the historical Jesus and conclusion that the Gospels do not provide the factual biography of Jesus that the church has often assumed. Schweitzer’s German contemporary William Wrede observed a clear distinction in the New Testament between the historical Jesus and the heavenly Christ. The transition flows from the Resurrection to the Ascension of Jesus. Although events in the ministry of Jesus continue to be important in projecting the gospel, post-Easter Christians began to focus on Jesus as the heavenly Christ, one with the Father.

The transition is familiar to anyone who has experienced the death of someone close. During the lifetime of a companion or friend, they are not limited to the memories of the past. In fact, we might celebrate the changes and growth that has taken place in life, while we anticipate the next page of a growing biography. But after death, even for people of faith who hope for eternal life the history, the biography of a deceased companion comes to an end. We no longer anticipate the next event in our history together. We begin to think of our companion in the being and presence of the eternal God.

The transfiguration of Jesus is described as a mountaintop experience. The inner-circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John, were led by Jesus to the top of a mountain. The exact location is unknown and probably unimportant. The disciples’ *vision* (Matthew’s word) is described as divine light radiating from the person of Jesus. They also saw two figures from Hebrew history, Moses and Elijah, on either side of the Christ. Moses was identified with the Torah, the Law of God, and Elijah with the prophets. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Horeb, and Elijah is the only person in the Bible who returns to the same mountain. On Horeb, Elijah encountered God not in the wind, the earthquake, or fire, but in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12).

In character, Peter decided to take charge of the event; he suggested the construction of three tents, one for each of the heavenly figures. Then the voice from heaven interrupted Peter with the same affirmation that was heard at the baptism of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved,” and the command, “Listen to him!” The disciples were terrified, but Jesus called them to their feet with a common word of assurance in the Bible: “do not be afraid.” His call, “Get up,” was the word of Jesus to call the dead to life in the Gospels.

The holy city of Jerusalem was constructed on a mountaintop. Mount Zion was not only the location for Jerusalem; it was the place where the Temple was constructed and reconstructed three times. Mount Zion was where Second Isaiah envisioned the final chapter of history where all of the nations of the world would come in pilgrimage to worship God. Mountaintops, “high places,” were favorite locations for temples and cities in the ancient world of the Bible both for the Jews and their ancient neighbors. Not only did the elevation provide an extra measure of military protection, the location was believed to be closer to the divine. The vertical structure of good and evil was the common wisdom;

God is up and evil is down; God dwells in the heavens; chaos dwells in the abyss below.

Mountaintops were also significant in the Gospels. According to Matthew, Jesus preached his famous sermon on a mountaintop—the new Moses bringing the rule of God (the Kingdom) to the people. In various passages in the Gospels, Jesus chose a mountaintop retreat for prayer. In Matthew's Ascension, the final word from Christ, the Great Commission, was spoken from a mountaintop. Thus, the classic biblical Ascension story in Acts takes place on a mountaintop outside Jerusalem.

In this world of space exploration, the spacial ups and downs of the Bible do not make a lot of sense, but the human experiences of disciples described in spacial language makes perfect sense. King's mountaintop had nothing to do with geography or topography and everything to do with worship.

Have you been to the mountaintop? In other words, have you experienced the presence of God? For that matter, we might also ask, have you experienced the absence of God? Life consists of highs and lows. Any honest reflection on the days of your life will uncover both high experiences in your walk with God and moments of fear and anxiety.

Growing up in the evangelical tradition of revival religion, my early religion rested on questions of experience. Salvation was never just about what you believe but about your experience in faith. That usually meant that a certain level of emotional expression was important to authenticate one's faith. A big issue that was sometimes debated with our neighbors from brand X church was about "heartfelt religion." The expectation was that everyone had to experience a blinding light from heaven and hear heavenly voices in order to be saved. The conversion of Paul was the model.

One of my early literary mentors in preaching was Clovis Chappell. In spite of the fact that he was a Methodist, Chappell's books were introduced by my Baptist preaching professor Gordon Clinard. Chappell loved biblical biography. Almost all of his published sermons were on biblical characters, calling for the congregation to find themselves in the lives of the people in biblical history. I learned from Chappell that people are far more interested in human experiences of God than they are in creeds and theological nitpicking.

In one of Chappell's sermons, he confronted the issue of evangelism and conversion out of his own religious experience. He told about growing up as a child of his church. He never remembered feeling alienated from God because he had grown up in a household where faith in God was a way of life. He compared his experience of God with two ponies on the family farm born within the same week. One was given to him as a pet; the other was just another farm horse. The regular attention he gave his pony came through when it was time for riding. The pony was so accustomed to the human touch that he hardly bucked at the saddle and then the weight of a rider. But the farm horse had been left alone. When it came time to ride, it was a genuine conversion experience.

As a pastor, I found that people do not climb to the top of the mountain every time I struggle to proclaim the word of faith. In fact, I found that the experience of the presence of God is not something that I can create or control from the pulpit. It eventually became apparent to me that at least half of the sermon comes to church in the hearts of the people of God. If we are going to experience the presence of God, we must come to worship with an expectation that we will meet God in the congregation.

At the same time, we need to confess that we are not always open or ready. My or your experience of God's presence does not control or determine the whereabouts of God. Our ups and downs are ours, not God's.

Shall we follow Jesus or worship Christ? Early Christians made a distinction between the Jesus of history and the eternal Christ of the Ascension, but they did not call people to make a choice. Following Jesus had a different meaning for the disciples who left their nets to learn from Rabbi Jesus and to participate in his ministry of compassion than it did for Paul, whose only experience of the Christ was after his resurrection and anchored in the experience of worship.

The Gnostic writing discovered at Nag Hamaddi, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, places the transfiguration event at the Ascension of Jesus. Furthermore the Gnostics created a firestorm of controversy over the claim that Jesus was never a real, flesh-and-blood, human person; he only

“appeared” to be human. They liked the Transfiguration that put Jesus above it all in an ethereal cloud where he was untouchable and unreachable.

The transfiguration event in the Gospels is not so inscrutable. At the transfiguration, the disciples were led as we are to the mountaintop to experience God in ways that they had never known before. The same Christ led them down the mountain into a world of need to follow him in healing the sick and abandoned people of the world.