

*Where Is Your Mountain?*

Dr. D. William McIvor

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lessons**

In the Christian calendar, the last Sunday before Lent is called the Transfiguration of the Lord. So today we read Matthew's version of the transfiguration alongside an Old Testament passage describing Moses on the mountain of revelation, when God's law was given to God's people. By reading these two texts together, we see what the early Christians understood about Jesus. There was no diminishing the importance of Moses, nor that of the prophetic tradition represented in the gospel text by Elijah. But everything now centers in Jesus Christ. In the transfiguration God's voice comes from heaven to say of Jesus, "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!" We still read the Old Testament, both the Law and the Prophets, as God's Word to us. But for Christians, God's Word always sounds in the voice of Jesus Christ. Let's turn first to Exodus.

Exodus 24.12-18 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

Then Moses went up on 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. 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 people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17.1-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice 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. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

### **Mountains and Valleys**

What assures us that God is our help in ages past and our hope for years to come, is Jesus. We must listen to him and understand everything that happens through him. But it's not as easy as we

might think. Both ancient and modern disciples are almost always perplexed by Jesus.

Just think of poor Peter, James, and John. In the verses just before the transfiguration story, Jesus told disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to be defeated by the chief priests and to be killed. But on the mountain of transfiguration they saw something very different. They saw Jesus' glory. As one writer put it, "[Jesus] is the one who commands the wind and the waves, who drives out demons, who cures the blind, mute, and lame; this is the one who justly judges, but this is also the one who becomes subject to death on our behalf."<sup>1</sup> Jesus says he's going to be killed but a few days later Peter, James, and John have this stunningly spectacular mountaintop experience with him. Is it any wonder that the disciples were confused and afraid?

We don't know what to make of this mountaintop experience. Even great preachers don't know what to say about it. The late great George Buttrick, for example, for many years pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, once said, "For myself, I have never dared preach on the Transfiguration: it is the Shekinah of the New Testament. I shield my eyes and bow my head: this is a split in history. Almost the whole plan is seen in shadowed light."<sup>2</sup>

The whole plan of God is seen here, from Moses, through the prophets, to Christ. But what does it mean, this glorious mountaintop, seen nonetheless in shadowed light?

I think it means we must look for the transfiguring moments, the mountaintop highs. We all have them. Music transfigures us, of course. That's what our worship is all about today. Music takes us places where mere words cannot take us. But there are also other transfiguring moments. They may be career mountaintops or family ones. They may be intensely personal. One of the joys of being a pastor is that I get to hear about some of your mountaintops. These are the moments when life seems pure and clear and we want to hang on to them.

But we cannot hang on to them and we can't stay forever on the mountain. That was the hard lesson for Peter. "This is great, Lord. Let me build some booths to hang out in." Even though the fulfillment of God's plan was glimpsed on the mountain, Jesus came back down to the valley because there was work to be done. And we must come down from the mountain as well.

I know this dates me and some of our young people won't even know who I'm talking about. But one of my favorite groups when I was in high school and college was Peter, Paul and Mary. (They are still singing, by the way.) Noel Paul Stookey, who is a Christian, once wrote a song once about mountains and valleys and the Christian life. The song is about a man named John Henry Bosworth who in the turmoil of the 1960s packed his wife and daughter in the car and headed for the country and the contemplative life. He spent his years tending the farm and reading the Good Book. Except for the part about reading the Bible, we may think he was just escaping. Not so. He was preparing. Thinking the apocalypse might come in the 1980s, here's one of the verses:

John Henry Bosworth, 1984:  
the sky is red, the city's dead  
and there's a knock upon the door.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 154.

<sup>2</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Advent/Christmas/Epiphany* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 173. George Arthur Buttrick (1892–1983) was pastor at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church from 1927–1954. He moved from there to Harvard where he was Minister to the Memorial Chapel and the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals.

Every piece of Scripture, every prayer he prayed,  
had brought him to this moment of this particular day.  
“Open the doors,” he cried, “let the brothers and the sisters inside.  
I got everything to give now and nothing left to hide.”

Then after that verse this chorus:

And I was wondering if you had been to the mountain  
to look at the valley below?  
Did you see all the roads tangled down in the valley?  
Did you know which way to go?  
Oh, the mountain stream runs pure and clear  
and I wish to my soul I could always be here.  
But there’s a reason for living way down in the valley  
that only the mountain knows.

Jesus knew that and he faced the valley that was Jerusalem by going first to the mountain. He knew the task before him and he needed the vision from above before he went to fulfill it.

So it is with us. We need mountaintop experiences and we especially need them with Jesus. Let’s not think our lives are fulfilled just because we have some grand moments, whether they be career, family, financial, or personal mountaintops. We need to go up the mountain from time to time with the Lord.

When we do, we’ll be tempted, like Peter was, to stay there with Jesus. When everything is good and beautiful and clear, we want it to stay that way. We always want to contain God, to domesticate the Spirit, to make Jesus stay in one place. But we cannot build a booth to hold him. We can’t keep him here in church. We can’t hang on to yesterday’s glory or face tomorrow with the courage of the past. Jesus goes to Jerusalem and as disciples we must go with him.<sup>3</sup> The vision of the mountain thrills us and sustains us. We need it. But there’s a reason for living way down in the valley, that only the mountain knows.

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<sup>3</sup> Hauerwas, 157. “Peter, humbled by Jesus’ previously stern condemnation, this time rightly defers to Jesus: ‘If you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ Peter’s suggestion, however, implies that he fails to understand that Moses and Elijah, God’s good servants, now worship Jesus. Peter wants to build booths to commemorate this great event, but Jesus’ flesh is the booth of God’s presence. Accordingly, Jesus cannot be, as Peter wishes, confined to a location, but rather Jesus must go to Jerusalem, and the disciples must go with him.”