

Beyond the Mountaintop – Josiah Mohr

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

A mountaintop experience, one that provides us with a moment of divine awe, clarity, revelation, or epiphany, is an encounter that has been experienced by many of us. We rightly place great value in these very tangible encounters of God, fully embracing those fateful moments that allow us to bask in the presence of God. The transfiguration story in today's text is perhaps the ultimate expression of that kind of encounter. To be clear, the mountaintop experience is not some magical transportation to another world. Rather it is perhaps better described as an in-breaking of the glory of God's coming kingdom into our present reality, as did occur in this transfiguration of Christ. There is, however, still a distinct difference between this "mountaintop experience" and our experience of the "real world," which can make difficult the transference of revelations from the peace on the mountain to the chaos in the valley.

I found the fog of this transition from mountain to valley to be especially well encapsulated by the imagination of C.S. Lewis in the penultimate episode of his adventures in Narnia, *The Silver Chair*. In the second chapter, the God-representative character of Aslan commissions and cautions Jill with a word that echoes the essence of today's transfiguration text. "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly: I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them down there. That is why it is so important that you know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs."

Retrospectively for us, the transfiguration story does indeed clearly speak to the identity of Christ as the son of God. But reminiscent of Peter in today's text, we must admit that we don't always understand the purpose and message of a mountaintop experience as well as we think, initially as it is happening, or even for some time thereafter. But I don't believe we necessarily should or need to imminently have a fulfilling understanding. You see, the mountaintop experience is not the end—not the conclusion of some grand build-up of glory. Rather it is the beginning—the origin of a great adventure that the mountaintop experience is empowering us to embark upon, providing us with signs to guide us along the way. Just as Aslan earlier delivered signs of the way to Jill, God has also delivered signs of the way to us in today's texts; and as Aslan later commands, God commands as well: "The first step is to remember the signs"—"remember the signs and believe the signs."

So what are the signs from the mountain of transfiguration and what does it mean to believe them? What must we take note of and carry with us off of the mountain? What are we to be and do as we descend the mountain? What power and purpose are we to live with and into once we have emigrated from the mountain? These are the questions pertinent to the days following the mountaintop experience: after Pentecost, The Passion Conference, a St. Meinrad's retreat, the eleventh day of WalkAbout, church camp revivals, etc., etc. What are the signs and how can they provide us clarity, vocation, and affirmation beyond the mountain?

The first sign is the instruction of God to obediently pay attention, to be quiet, and to listen. This is delivered from the text in Matthew verses five and seven: *From the cloud a voice*

*[the voice of God] said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ...[Then] Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."* As Aslan noted earlier, the sign seems clear indeed: *Listen to him!* Yet how often, when we are pursuing some revelation or epiphany from God, do we continue to babble on in a desperate attempt to conjure up the will of God? Oh how often we act like Peter, who just prior to this instruction was speaking, babbling on in presence of God's glory. If only we were to listen, we would hear the gentle, touching words of Jesus: *Get up and do not be afraid.* Go and live in and out and through the glory of God that you have just received!

Not long after Aslan delivered the wisdom of remembering the signs to Jill, she found herself propelled through the air, flying toward Narnia. She too, however, was too busy babbling and wallowing in the past mistakes she had made and her perceived character flaws to notice the gentle breath of Aslan launching her out into the mission field. For us, as well, it truly will be upon the breath of God that we too are instructed and commissioned to go out and do the work of the kingdom away from the mountain. We must come to an understanding, as Peter and Jill learned, that listening to the instruction of God and going on Christ's command is an essential step in clarifying the purpose of our mountaintop experiences.

I would like us to return to scripture to notice the second sign from the mountain, which is that of incarnation. Unique to Matthew's account of the transfiguration story is a small note in verse seven that I believe has incredible implications: *Jesus came over and touched them.* Jesus came over, displacing himself from the point of glory, and touched them, physically reaffirming his embodied humanity and presence with them. Too often, following a mountaintop experience, we try to explain it, to share with words the feeling of the encounter. What if, instead of first trying to explain it, we embodied it, bringing the revelations to life for others? What if, rather than trying to maintain the feelings of safety, comfort, and power from our momentary encounter with glory, we instead displace ourselves and physically live in touching proximity with those Jesus calls us to serve? In this way, our encounter with glory is not our own to hold, but rather is a commissioning to be Christ incarnate, helping to empower, comfort, and secure the least of these into the community and kingdom of God.

It is also no wonder that Jesus tells his disciples in verse nine, during their descent from the mountain, to be quiet about what they had seen: because he knew that they would mess up and misunderstand the message if they were not willing to first embody the Gospel. The transfiguring—the in-breaking of the kingdom of God—is not at all reserved for the mountain but is meant to continue beyond through our lives as a conduit for transfiguring glory of God to be made present in the world. We must not make the same mistake as Peter and assume that the mountain is where we are to permanently reside. We are indeed given the vocation to emigrate, to leave the mountain, the four walls of the church, and the safety, comfort, and security of our Christian bubbles so that we may embody the transfiguring glory of God for the whole world to see, to be present with, and to touch.

The third and final sign from the mountain is that of the inspiration that comes from the Holy Spirit, which perpetually carries the instruction and incarnation of God in us while we are away from the mountain. Speaking from the perspective of an eyewitness, the author of Second Peter assures us that the signs from the mountain, from an encounter with the glory of God, are not just some *cleverly devised myths*. The mountaintop experience is indeed a reliable affirmation of God's glory as well Christ's identity as God's son and our savior. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the final member of the divine Trinity, we too can rest assured of our identity in Christ as embodiments of his Gospel, fulfilling the instructions of his commission.

The text in verse nineteen of Second Peter also reminds us that we must be attentive to this inspiration of the Holy Spirit while we are away from the mountain: *You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*. This is a truth that is made present by C.S. Lewis as well: "'Child,' said Aslan, in a gentler voice, '...Repeat to me [the signs].' Jill tried, and didn't get them quite right. So the Lion corrected her, and made her repeat them again and again till she could say them perfectly." Just as with Aslan, so does our God affirm the signs and will continue to encourage us to repeat, to remember, and to believe the signs—for it is by these signs that we will recognize and know the transfiguring work of the kingdom of God in the world, beyond the mountain.

It is now from this mountain of transfiguration that we set out on our Lenten journey, setting our face to go to Jerusalem with Christ. Along the way, we will come to a better understanding our broken humanity and our need for the help of God. But, we will also find clarity, vocation, and affirmation in the signs from the mountain, despite our opaque view of them, clouded by the fallen state of our world. Like Peter and Jill, we too can come to a better understanding of the signs, the more we focus upon them—the more we remember and believe them. We must do as Aslan instructs our friend Jill: "Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the signs," the signs of instruction, incarnation, and inspiration—the signs from the mountain.