

## Sermon

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*The Mountain of God*

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Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is the life and light itself in the world.

Amen.

Whenever the story of the Transfiguration comes around, most preachers (myself included) focus on the characters. The first verse introduces us to four of them: Jesus, Peter, James, and John.

As you know, Peter, James, and John supposedly make up the “inner circle” of Jesus’ disciples. Jesus confides in them. Yet for an event as important as the transfiguration, why didn’t he include the rest of his followers? Imagine how Andrew in particular would have felt, especially since Jesus called him before he summoned James and John according to Matthew 10:2? Why was he excluded? Did he fall from the ranks?

Verse three introduces two more characters in the story, namely, Moses and Elijah. They appear next to Jesus, talking with him. Again, the same question arises: why did they appear instead of other great men of Israel’s past like Abraham or King David? What made them so special?

Fortunately, while no one can explain why Jesus left behind nine of his twelve disciples, we *do* at least know why Moses and Elijah appear in the story: Moses represents the law, which God gave him in the form of the Ten Commandments. The commandments were meant to teach the Israelites how to live in *right relationship* with God and one another.

Elijah, on the other hand, represents the prophets, that is, those who speak on behalf of God when the people of God *violate the commandments* God gave them through Moses. These commandments serve to promote the flourishing of all people. When that fails, as when the rich steal from or exploit the poor, prophets like Amos and Isaiah rise up and condemn the practice as contrary to God’s will.

By highlighting the role of Moses and Elijah in the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, the “intent” of the story seems clear: the writer of Matthew’s Gospel wants to show the *continuity* between Jesus and his predecessors. Like Moses, Jesus has the authority to teach and interpret the law. Like Elijah, Jesus possesses the ability to speak on behalf of God. Why else would the voice from the heavens conclude by saying “listen to him” (Matt. 17:5)?

The story, in short, underscores the *authority of Jesus* in matters of teaching and preaching. Jesus correctly teaches or interprets God’s law, just as he faithfully preaches or declares God’s Word. The same Spirit that spoke through law and later through the prophets, to borrow the language of the Nicene Creed, now speaks through him.

So, there you have it: Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John – the cast of today’s Gospel reading, the men we meet at the top of the mountain. But what about the mountain itself? Have you ever heard an explanation concerning *its* significance?

If not, then I have fantastic news for each of you. I am going to talk about it now for the next *fifteen minutes*, showing you three angles from which the mountain in today's story has been viewed – as a literal mountain, as a metaphor for the spiritual journey, and as a place of hope with respect to the future.

More broadly, I'm going to show why the mountain in today's story matters, how it can enable us to express everything from the challenges that come with our faith to the hope we have for life beyond the grave as Christians.

## **Mountains and Meaning**

To me, mountains are nature's cathedrals. The bigger they are, the more they inspire a sense of awe and wonder.

The capacity of mountains to inspire certain feelings like awe belong to people everywhere, including those who lived in the ancient Near East. Indeed, they were "the site of divine revelation throughout the ancient world; even in cultures as far-flung as Greece and Japan, a mountain [was] a common location for a theophany" (Plunket-Brewton, *Working Preacher*, "Commentary on Exodus 24:12-18," accessed on 2/16/23).

While our Gospel reading never identifies the "high mountain" upon which Jesus and his disciples heard the voice from the heavens, Exodus tells us that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai only to be enveloped by a thick cloud where he met God and talked with him, as a friend would, face-to-face. The writers of Deuteronomy and 1 Kings likewise refer to Mt. Sinai, only they call it Mt. Horeb, the place to which Elijah later flees to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel.

I love the story.

Elijah travels "40 days and 40 nights" (i.e., a really long time) to reach Mt. Horeb. His journey would have been arduous. Traveling through the wilderness of the broader Sinai Peninsula would have included the prospect of facing threats ranging from wild beasts to "savage wandering tribes" (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, p. 1104). The greeting he receives upon arrival seems accordingly disproportionate. Instead of welcoming him with open arms and killing the proverbial fatted-calf, God simply asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Now, I don't know about you, but if I was Elijah I would have been a little upset. After all, when the rest of the Israelites fell away from God by worshipping idols, destroying God's altars, and killing God's prophets, Elijah remained faithful. He was the last prophet God had – the last *Jedi*.

Seemingly unmoved, however, God replies by telling Elijah to stand on the same mountain Moses had stood upon centuries earlier and wait for God to "pass by" as God had done before. This time, though, something different happens. Elijah encounters God neither in a cloud nor in the "spectacular elements of the storm

outside the cave" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 525). Instead, God comes to him in the "sheer silence" (NRSV) that follows the storm.

It's a pivotal moment in the biblical chronology of Israel, one where the classic experience of God undergoes a fundamental change. Revise your expectations, the author seems to be telling his audience, so that you may come to know God's quieter, more subtle ways.

Stop expecting, in other words, to find or experience God *on your terms*. Is this not exactly the message we need to hear when we reject God or become angry with God for failing to solve our problems or swooping down to save us whenever we need help? Might the story of Elijah invite us to put ourselves in the prophet's place, climbing the mountain where his ancestors encountered God only now to experience the Lord in a totally different way – "in the sound," as the old Simon & Garfunkel song goes, "of silence"?

### **Another Type of Mountain**

Elijah's experience of God offers us an important lesson. Had he insisted that God meet him the way God met his ancestors, namely, as a "devouring fire on the top of the [same] mountain" (Ex. 24:17), he would have missed God's much more subtle presence entirely.

He would have also missed the point. God shows up to us on God's terms, not ours. God meets us in hidden and surprising ways.

Missing the point, however, would not have belonged to Elijah alone. Whenever we reduce the truth of a story like his to an actual occurrence or event in history, we overlook the its deeper significance, its *true* value. Such, at least, was the viewpoint of Pseudo-Dionysius.

According to the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul converted a man named "Dionysius the Areopagite" after preaching in the city square of Athens (17:34). Several centuries later, an anonymous Christian mystic wrote a series of reflections on spirituality under the pseudonym "Dionysius" to lend his writings greater credibility, hence the name "Pseudo-Dionysius."

As a mystic, Dionysius sought to uncover what the stories of the Bible teach us at a deeper level regarding the soul and its *spiritual journey* back to God. Instead of interpreting the trek of Moses or Elijah to the top of Mt. Sinai exclusively as an event that took place once upon a time, Dionysius interpreted them as allegories.

An allegory, as you know, refers to a story with two different levels of meaning. On its surface, the story of Moses has an obvious or literal meaning. It tells us about a man who climbed a mountain and then encountered God. To find the deeper (i.e., allegorical) meaning of the story, we simply need to ask ourselves who Moses represents or symbolizes.

Thankfully, Dionysius answers the question with great ease: Moses represents the human spirit as it ascends toward God through a special method of contemplation called the *via negativa*.

Let's practice it.

Think for a moment of the different ways we describe God. We refer to God as a rock, as our redeemer, or as "our Father who art in heaven." We attribute to God a range of qualities as well. We say God is good or merciful, for instance. One New Testament writer even goes so far as to equate God with *love itself* (see 1 Jn. 4:8, 12).

Now what happens when we begin to strip away, clear aside, or negate these names and descriptions we have for God? We speak, for example, of God as a loving father, but we all instinctively know that our understanding of fatherhood falls dramatically short of encapsulating God's actual nature. God may be like a loving father, sure, but fatherhood constitutes only one dimension of God's being, not the greater mystery of God in all its totality.

So, what do we do?

Perhaps Islam can help. This tradition "employs a litany of ninety-nine names [for God]. The hundredth name, believed to be the one which expresses the true essence of divinity, is honored in silence" (Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 119). We see this in the story of Elijah: after setting aside wind and fire as ways of referring to God (1 Kgs. 19:11-12), he encounters God in the "sheer silence" that follows.

Does this sound lofty? If so, let me offer another example. Imagine someone said to me, "Dan, describe your mother. Tell me who she was." It certainly would not take me long to realize the inadequacy of my response. I could describe my mom as unconditionally loving, empathetic, creative, artistic, and sure, sometimes critical. Yet none of these terms could capture her essence. They might frame her, but they cannot *name* her.

How much truer would that be of God, the mystery of which, to quote one of my favorite sages, "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together"? How much truer would that be of the One "in whom we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28)?

### **Still Another Type of Mountain**

We have now viewed the "mountain of God" from two different angles.

Literally speaking, the mountain refers to the summit Moses and Elijah climbed in order to experience God. Allegorically speaking, the mountain represents the path we take in our effort to unlearn what we have learned about God so that we can experience God as the silent mystery beyond all the words and names we have for God.

There is another mountain in the Bible, however. It has no geographical location, nor does it represent the upward path of the soul back to its source. Let me explain.

A moment ago, I mentioned my mother. She died, as most of you know, a month ago. It was a loss beyond words. Afterward, many people offered their condolences. Most of them thankfully refrained from the usual religious platitudes. Rarely did I hear “she’s in a better place,” for example, which is good. I know she would have strongly preferred her recliner in the living room to the urn where her ashes now reside on mantle.

That said, there is a “place” in the Bible where I hope she *will* reside someday, a *truly* better place, a different mountain than the one about which we heard today. On it, as we read in Isaiah, God “will destroy . . . the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [and] he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces. . . . [and] it will be said on that day, ‘Lo, this is from our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us” (25: 7-9).

You know the name of this mountain. It appears in Isaiah as well as the Book of Revelation. It’s Zion.

Zion is not a place to find God somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula. Nor is it a metaphorical mountain we must climb in our effort to experience God. It belongs, rather, in the future as a symbol of our hope that God will ultimately transform this broken world into a new creation, one where death, as Paul says, has “lost its sting” and love has conquered all.

Jesus’ transfiguration prefigures the new creation that comes at the end. On the mountain he climbed for us, we see in the radiance of his appearance a “foretaste of the feast to come.” The transfiguration serves as the basis for our hope, hope that every tear will be wiped away, hope to be reunited with our loved ones as part of the larger, if not universal, communion of saints.

Mom, if love is stronger than death, then I will see you again. Jesus’ transfiguration helps me to believe it. May it confirm your hope too.

In Jesus’ name,  
Amen.