

Up on the Mountain

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

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This morning's second reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew. But before I read it, let me give you a little background. Of the four gospels, Matthew is addressed particularly to a Jewish audience. The readers of the Gospel of Matthew were very familiar with Jewish history, Jewish law, Jewish traditions. So Matthew is able to make reference to those Jewish traditions, and know that his readers will pick up on the reference. That very thing happens in this morning's scripture. Matthew tells this story in such a way that his Jewish audience will get the point.

Matthew 17:1-9

All this took place on the mountain. THE mountain. Sure, there were various other mountains and high places around, but there was only one mountain that could be considered THE mountain. For the Hebrew people THE mountain was Mount Sinai. Samantha read about it just a few minutes ago. It was on Mt. Sinai, that holy mountain shrouded in clouds and smoke, where Moses went to meet God, and to receive God's law, God's commands. When Moses came down from the mountain, he brought with him God's gift of grace that came in the form of instructions for living—how to live in right relationship with God and how to live in right relationship with each other.

From that point on, Mt. Sinai seemed to influence everything that happened. You know how in those Japanese paintings you always see snow-capped Mt. Fuji in the background? It's like it doesn't really qualify as a painting unless Mt. Fuji there. Well, for the Hebrews Mt. Sinai was like that. It's almost like you can constantly see Mt. Sinai in the background, looming there to remind the people of what God did there.

Over the years that followed Moses' experience on THE mountain, that holy mountain of Mt. Sinai, a gradual change took place. God's law, that had been given as a gift of grace to guide the people in their relationship with God and their relationships with each other, gradually was transformed from a liberating gift of grace into a restricting set of rules.

Let me give you a f'instance. You know that the Ten Commandments say, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy...you shall not work on the Sabbath." But as time went by, people wanted more clarity about what that meant. For example, is cooking meal on the Sabbath considered work? What about taking a walk—is that work? People wanted to know so they wouldn't run the risk of breaking this commandment. Over time, this gift of grace turned into a burden. By the way, the answer to those questions is Yes, cooking a meal is considered work, and No, taking a walk is not considered work unless you go more than a mile from your house, in which case it does become work. Unless you take a chair with you to represent your house, so that you will never be more than a mile from your house. You see how cumbersome this can get.

By the time of Jesus, the law had become almost like a millstone—not liberating at all, but a burden that weighed people down. That mountain looming in the background was not a source of freedom and joy, but a source of restriction and burden.

I think that is why in his gospel, Matthew pays such close attention to those times that Jesus goes up on THE mountain. According to the Gospel of Matthew, a number of pivotal events in the ministry of Jesus take place on a mountain. Of course, they aren't all set on the exact Mt. Sinai, but for Matthew and his Jewish readers, that didn't really matter. All he has to do is to mention the mountain, and everyone automatically pictures Mt. Sinai—THE mountain.

Here are some of the mountaintop experiences Jesus had.

As soon as Jesus has called his first disciples, Jesus goes up on “the mountain” and there is where Jesus’ public ministry begins. On that mountain, Jesus teaches the people. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. In that Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about the law, something very familiar to his Jewish audience. He says, “You have heard that it was said (and he quotes some portion of the Old Testament law)...but I say to you (and he gives the law a whole new meaning).”

In that Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to the people who were so preoccupied with the burdens and struggles of life, including their efforts to keep this and that little detail of the law, “Do not worry about your life...your heavenly Father knows what you need.”

The word that Jesus spoke on THE mountain was a word that rather than adding to the burdens of life, sets people free from them. It's a word of grace.

Then as Matthew continues his gospel, for a few chapters Jesus engages people, heals people, teaches people down in the flatlands. But then once again Jesus goes up on the mountain to meet God and pray. And Matthew tells us that when Jesus came down from the mountain, he encountered the disciples who were out on the Sea of Galilee, afraid for their lives because of a storm. And here's what Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; it is I.”

The word that Jesus brings down from the mountain is a word of grace, a word of love: Don't be afraid; I am with you.

It isn't long before again Jesus goes up on the mountain to be alone with God. However, this time crowds of people follow him. There are sick people, blind people, lame people, hungry people. And seeing those crowds, Jesus had compassion on them. And so he fed them.

It's happening again, the word that comes from THE mountain is a word of love and compassion for God's people.

Time and time again, Jesus brings down from the mountain a word of love and grace. It's like Jesus is taking the people back to that mountain where Moses first received the revelation from God and is reminding them of the true, original meaning of that word from God. It's not a restrictive, burdensome millstone, but a word of freedom and joy.

Now in our passage for today, Jesus again goes up on the mountain. There is no doubt that the setting for this passage is intended to bring to the mind of the reader that time Moses went up on Mt. Sinai. The mountain is again shrouded in clouds and smoke, and again God speaks. Here again Moses is there. It's clear that Matthew wants us to get

in our minds that time that Moses met with God on the mountain and now to see that mountaintop experience in a new light.

The scripture goes like this. Jesus takes with him three of his disciples—Peter, James and John, and they go up on the mountain. There suddenly Jesus changed; the garment that Jesus was wearing turned dazzling white. As the disciples looked on, Moses and Elijah appeared. And then out of the cloud God spoke, “This is my Son, the Beloved. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Peter, who thinks this is the greatest thing ever says, “Let’s just stay here. Let’s forget about all that down there in the flatlands. Let’s just stay here on this mountain. We’ll build some dwellings—one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah, and we’ll all just stay here.”

Every time I read this account of what we call the “transfiguration of Jesus” I can’t help but think about those other nine disciples who were left down there in the flatlands. Peter, James and John got to have that mountaintop experience with Jesus. But what if you were Andrew or Bartholomew or James the son of Alphaeus or one of the other nine disciples? They did not get to have this experience on the mountain for themselves. They had to hear it second hand from those who were there.

In a way you might think that they got cheated. While the chosen three got to have this amazing, transforming encounter with God, the other nine were denied that experience. So were they short-changed? Did they not get the full benefit of the word of grace that came from THE mountain, like those chosen three had? Did they get cheated? No, of course not. Even though they did not get to have this experience for themselves, the love and grace and transforming power that came from that mountaintop experience were just as real for those nine down in the flatlands as for the three who saw it first hand.

For those nine, theirs was a second-hand faith. The message of love came to them through the testimony of others, but it was no less true or no less real as for those eyewitnesses.

Which, if you think about it, is the same way you and I have received the good news. Yours and mine is a second-hand faith. Through the faithful witness of others, we have heard the good news of God’s love. And that also means that you and I are in a position to be bearers of that good news to others. It’s through our testimony—yours and mine—that other people can hear about God’s grace and mercy and love.

Before I close, I want to mention one final mountaintop experience that Matthew describes for us. This one takes place at the end of his gospel, on Easter evening. The disciples have just heard the shocking news that Jesus, who had died on the cross and was buried in the tomb, was not dead, but was raised from the dead. With a combination of fear and joy they tried to take it in. That was when Jesus appeared to them that Easter evening and told them to meet him in Galilee. Matthew 28:16 says, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Jesus said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

The final word from the mountain is just like the first word from the mountain: a word of love, a promise that we have nothing to fear because Jesus is with us. Sisters and

brothers, this is good news. It's good news that we have received and which we can now share with others. Thanks be to God.✠