

## **MOUNTAINS, HILLS AND HEIGHTS**

**Sermon Preached by Rev. Edee C. Fenimore**

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Texts: Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36

Well, if you want drama and spectacle, if you love adventure and mystery, if special effects are your thing, then the two lessons that were read this morning were right up your alley. Did you hear all that spectacle? Did you hear the references to shining faces, veils, trips up and down a mountain, dazzling white clothes, changed appearance, and voices from clouds? These two stories fairly scream “Look here, way up here, on this mountain, on this hill, on these heights! God is here!”

But these stories are not really about geography. I know, both of them take place on mountains but they are about the heights of ecstatic religious experience. And they are amazing stories but what in heaven or on earth do they have to do with us, living in this time and place? I do realize that both stories emphasize the great mystery of what it is to be in God’s presence. And that is surely a lesson we all need in this time when many of our sisters and brothers feel they know and therefore must speak with absolute certainty about what God wants, what God means, what God is like and what God is saying in certain happenings in the world. A sense of awe and mystery is essential in dealing with the divine. So the umbrella lesson alone is important for us. We can never capture all of what God is or wants. Our minds, as amazing as they are, our language, poetic as it might be, our progress, as rapid as it has been- all these fall short when it comes to thinking about, describing, or understanding our creator, redeemer and friend. An important lesson, certainly, but I suspect there could be even more for us to learn.

Let’s touch again the high points (bad pun intended) of each of these stories. Moses has been to the top of the mountain. He has had a conversation with God, Yahweh, the creator of the universe. And this is not just a quick little chat. It is a deep conversation about what it means to be God’s people. It lasts forty days and forty nights and during that time Moses has to carve the Ten Commandments into two stone tablets. He carves the ten but he also listens to explanations and amplifications and illustrations that fill pages and pages of the law as recorded in the first five books of the Bible.

Moses is totally immersed in what it means to be God's people and to be in covenant with God. And after that 40 day and 40 night stay on the top of the mountain, Moses comes down to the base where the people are. As an aside, the people have been up to no good, down there waiting for Moses. They have been, according to the words recorded a few chapters earlier, running wild, making an idol, a golden calf, out of all their gold jewelry, worshipping that idol and in general behaving in all the ways against which the commandments speak. Moses comes down and the people see that the skin of his face is shining. This may be another small lesson for us; anyone spending a length of time in God's presence, learning God's ways, being taught how to live life the way that God desires, anyone who does that is going to be changed. They probably won't have the skin on their face suddenly lighting up any rooms. This is not about dermatology or cosmetology. It is about divinity and covenants. When we spend time in God's presence we are changed. Confronted by God's commands and trying to live them out we will change... certainly we will see the world differently and maybe the world will see us differently as well.

So Moses comes down to where the people are and perhaps because of his shining face, the outward sign of the truth that he has changed, the people are afraid to come near him. I wonder what Moses felt, to have the people, the same ones whom he had led out from slavery stay away from him. Did Moses have a moment when he muttered under his breath, "God, everyone stays away from me when I have been with you."? Did Moses ever bemoan the loneliness of giving the people God's message? I suspect he was well aware of the fact that this time with God separated him from the people. I think that that is why we have all this business about putting a veil on his face when he was speaking with the people but uncovering his face when he spoke with God. Perhaps there are a couple of lessons for us in this covering and uncovering that takes place. Before God we are always exposed, we cannot hide. It is foolish to even think about covering over our faults, our mistaken judgments. It is foolish to think we can show only the wonderful things that we do. God loves us not because of anything we do or don't do, anything we say or don't say, even anything we think or don't think. God loves us because of who God is, because of God's own nature. And alongside that assurance is the awareness that God is with us always. Consequently hiding, covering, veiling ourselves is futile in our relationship with The One who loves us unconditionally and always. Now, our relationship with other human beings is another story. Maybe the lesson from this veiling that Moses does is that sharing our enthusiasm from a mountaintop experience needs to be done at

the pace that is comfortable for others or at least at a pace that does not fill others with fear. Moses covers his face and that allows him to share with the people the commands of God. Moses does not allow the fear of the people to permanently rupture the relationship between the people and himself. Nor does Moses allow that fear to block the message that God commanded him to share.

Let's move to our second lesson. The experience of Peter, James, and John up on the mountain with Jesus certainly adds to the mystery of ecstatic religious experiences. We do not get answers or explanations in this story. We get more mystery, more special effects, more unexplainable happenings. These three who go up on the mountain with Jesus not only see his face change in appearance but observe his clothing changing as well. Sounding like an ad for laundry detergent, the writer of Luke says, "his clothes became dazzling white". As if that weren't enough, Peter, James and John then see Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus. Well what is that about? What's going on here, for them as well as for us? Moses is the great law-giver and Elijah is a great prophet. The writer of Luke is emphasizing that Jesus of Nazareth came not to destroy the law, not to supplant the prophets. He came to fulfill the law and the prophets. So the followers of Jesus see him with these paragons of their faith tradition, illustrating that fulfillment of which he spoke.

What happened next is so much our story that we might share an embarrassed smile. Peter, always the most impulsive of the disciples, says "Boy, oh boy, it's a good thing we're here. We should build dwellings for the three of you." Like many of us Peter wants to capture and make permanent what is essentially unable to be captured. There are some things that we experience and remember but cannot fully understand. And surely an intense awareness of God's presence is one of those experiences that cannot be made permanent.

Besides, there is work to be done once everyone comes down off that mountain. Moses, represents the law, God's commands. Disciples, then and now have to live out God's commands in the world. Elijah represents prophecy, the telling forth of the good news of God's love for the world. Disciples, then and now, are charged to live out that message. So there are no dwellings to be made on these mountains- no remaining there on the heights. The richness and excitement of being in God's presence is meant to transform or transfigure us so we can, with renewed energy, intelligence, imagination and love serve the world that God loves.

So we can go up to mountain tops, experience the heights, revel in the dramatic happenings. But for dwelling, for living we need to be in the world, with the people, seeking every day to find ways to further the love and justice that God desires. Then perhaps, if we listen, oh so carefully, we will hear a voice that says, "These are my children, my beloved children". Thanks be to God

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