

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
February 11, 2018

“Mountain High-lights”

“... there appeared to them Elijah and Moses,
who were talking with Jesus.”

Mark 9:4

Prelude:

Our scripture lesson this morning has as its setting a mountain. It is not simply a mountain - rather a “**high mountain**”, a “**high mountain set apart**” (Mark 9:2). It is a remote place, isolated, secluded.

The mountain is not named, which leaves scholars guessing, and those interested in biblical geography and archeology frustrated.

Why would our author not disclose the name of the place where once-upon-a-time Elijah and Moses appeared, and were seen to be talking with Jesus, as Jesus was transfigured?

The location is not given. The location is withheld. It could be any one of a number of mountains, within a range of peaks and valleys in the Galilee and to its north.

Or, it could not.

There is an intentional withholding of location, I sense. The mountain is a reserve; it is a place to be protected, to ensure it isn't littered with signage, with directions indicating "here," as opposed to "there."

The Bible is a panorama of visions and revelations, many with mountain settings. We read in the psalm, "**I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help**" (Psalm 121); The "**hills**" allude to the "**high places**" that proliferated in the promised land, where shrines and pillars (the Asherah, the "Queen of Heaven" – see Jeremiah 7:16-18) were anchored, staffed by priests who offered stiff competition to the God served by the likes of Moses and Elijah.

It was on a mountain in the range of **Ararat** that Noah's ark came to rest.

And it was on a mountain in the range of **Moriah** that Abraham took Isaac to sacrifice to God (Genesis 22:2).

It was on **Mount Horeb** that Moses came upon a blazing bush, where the Lord appeared, and said "the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5); it was to Horeb, "**the mount of God,**" that Elijah was refuge, and where God passed by to speak in the sound of silence.

It was on **Mt. Sinai** that God is said to have descended, wrapped in smoke, and there Moses was summoned to ascend, there at the top, the words we call the commandments were spoken (see Exodus 19:18, 20).

Moses took a hike up **Mount Nebo**, in the land of Moah, and it was from that perch, atop Pisgah, that he looked over yonder to the land of Canaan, and there he is said

to rest from his labors in a grave unmarked, having seen but never having set foot in promised land (see Deuteronomy 32).

Jerusalem is set upon **Mount Zion**, that there, some say,
God is pleased to dwell (see Isaiah 8:18).

The mountain in Mark – is cloaked in mystery.
To enshrine it would be to limit its allure,
diminish the reverence it commands.
It is best to not know the name or place,
which implies it could be any place, at any given time.

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The lesson is carefully crafted.
We have Peter, James, and John,
an inner circle, a troika within the twelve,
given privilege to “**behold.**”

The transfiguration –
it would seem to be a reporting of something
strange that occurred to Jesus, a metamorphosis,
his appearance being altered with dazzling brilliance.
Jesus – white as light, “dazzling” bright, star-like.

Let me caution as we seek to understand.
This is not about what happened to Jesus.
This is about what Peter, James, and John
saw as they made ascent with Jesus.
It is **the vision** they beheld –
when bedazzled by Jesus.

There appears Elijah and Moses,
pillars of the past; they are present
and talking with Jesus.

It is as if time is warped,
Jesus is in league with
Elijah and Moses.

It is all quite stunning.
Indeed, the “appearance”
is terrifying for Peter, James, and John
“**Terribly frightened,**” is one contemporary
translation (Contemporary English Version).

Things get a bit more complicated with the
appearance of the cloud. The “**cloud**”
enveloped, it overshadowed the disciples.
The “**Cloud**” isn’t just an
atmospheric disturbance.
We aren’t talking about a
“**visible mass of condensed vapor**”
that delights meteorologists;
and we aren’t talking about ethereal
information technology; this isn’t iCloud,
internet accessibility first century style.
This Cloud is manifestation of Maker,
Creator of the heavens and earth;
the source of Life, and in whom and
through whom the world has Being.

From within this Cloud,
a Voice
is heard to speak of Jesus:
“**This is my Child, the Beloved.**
Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7).

As soon as said, the spectacle is over.
There is disappearance. Nothing
except Jesus. “**They saw no one any more,**
but only Jesus.”

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There is a lot to digest in this.
Let’s work on just a couple of thoughts.
First, the appearance of Elijah and Moses.
They serve to establish Jesus’ continuity

with the rich and veritable traditions of Jesus' Jewish heritage.

Moses is both liberator and law giver. Moses worked to deliver a people from the chaos and cruelty of bondage, and paved way to promised land, well ordered, with liberty and justice for all.

In this vision, Moses does not bend or bow down to Jesus; he is seen to be a contemporary of Jesus, a conversation partner, one who might know something of working with a stubborn people, who are reluctant to advance where God would lead. Moses is informant, inspiration, friend.

How important it is that we look upon the law, not as a bridle and bit, but as gift, that governs life in ways that foster respect and mutuality.

We have Ash Wednesday coming up. We revisit the law, in part, during that service; and we assess the state of our compliance, or whether we have fallen short, and to what degree.

The law, the ten commandments, serve to undergird the moral fabric of our lives, singularly, and in community. And we are in desperate need of recovering the grace of the commandments, and appreciating what they teach, what they affirm, what they defend and protect, that we might have life, with abundance.

The commandments “**show us how to avoid being enslaved, how to save us from ourselves.** They lead

us to love, the essence of life” (see Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, p. 7).

As a boy – someone imparted to me the virtue of our first president, George Washington, the fabled tale of a tounge boy being given a hatchet and putting it to use, going around chopping up the neighborhood. He came upon a cherry tree, a favorite tree of his father. And he chopped.

Father Washington, discovering the deed done, asked of George - What happened to my tree?
As written by Parson Weems:

**"I cannot tell a lie, father,
you know I cannot tell a lie!
I did cut it with my little hatchet."**

**The anger died out of his father's face,
and taking the boy tenderly in his arms, he said:**

**"My son, that you should not be afraid
to tell the truth is more to me than a thousand trees!
yes, though they were blossomed with silver
and had leaves of the purest gold!"**

To tell the truth, worth more than a thousand trees blossom with silver, and leaves of gold.
What has happened to that sense of personal virtue and civic virtue?

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
So charged Miss Emily (No. 1263) ...

**The Truth must dazzle gradually
or every man be blind —**

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Elijah – the prophet. He also shares equal billing with Moses. The role of the prophets – to check and balance the powers that eclipse the order and government of God.

Prophets rain in and rain on the parades of presidents who think they are the law, rather than a subject under the law. The prophets serve to “see,” and they invite consideration that “**another world is possible**,” a world not broken and divided, but that can be transformed and restore in keeping with Divine provision.

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A second thought.

Let us consider the Voice from the cloud. “**Listen to him ...**” the gospel teaches. Listen to the Jesus whose life is linked with Moses and Elijah, whose love is to be streamed through us.

I’m not sure we are living up to this challenge of staying tuned to Jesus.

I was introduced to a new term this week: “**Computational Propaganda.**”

Computational propaganda is “**the use of information and communication technologies to manipulate perceptions, affect cognition, and influence behavior.**”

The messaging that assaults us, both foreign and domestic, isn’t just intended to impart information.

Note the end game: affecting cognition; it is “**about changing behavior**”

(see Sheila Kennedy, blog dated 2/5/18; “Quoting from a Politico”).

Changing behavior. Manipulating messages to impact votes, to sway decisions that determine life and death, who is welcome, and who is not; who gets help to get ahead, and who gets left behind; whose vote will get counted, and whose won't.

When a student in the late 1970's, there was a nerdy saint in our UCC, George Conklin, who was techie wise in the ways of recording sound and images on film and capturing images with photography. He taught a class at the Pacific School of Religion called **Television Awareness Training (TAT)**. There was church curriculum designed for consumer protection. It sought to make one savvy in navigating media manipulation.

Are we not in need of revising the TAT training materials suited for the 21st century?

Saints in the church,
citizens in the nation,
are at risk.

And aren't we equally in need of increasing our proficiency in prayer with spiritual discipline, with developing practices that fosters our capacity to **“listen.”** To “be still” (Psalm 46:10).

To be **“informed”** with what Jesus imparts:
goodness and mercy,
the love that keeps faith with the law and prophets,
the love that is always bent upon redemption.

It was Rubem Alves, the Brazilian liberation theologian, who said, **“Protestants and Catholics are alike. They prattle. They don't even try to listen.”**

He urged respect and admiration for what he called the **“space between words.”** It is there, in the space between words, where we wait for the Voice of the one who calls to us. In our praying we need ask **“the silence to speak to us”** (see *Transparencies of Eternity*, p. 58).

We do not need **“close our eyes and bow our heads.”** Alves urges: **“open your eyes as widely as possible. See how this world is so bright and beautiful!”**

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I think that may be what happened on the mountain. Eyes were opened as widely as possible. And there was flashing insight. Jesus was seen as transfigured. Jesus was exposed - revealed - known - in the beauty of holiness, in spirit and truth, as being radiant and wise and wonderful.

It was an early church father, Irenaeus, who is credited with saying:

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

As Jesus was seen, so also are we invited to see each other. The glory - the dwelling - the manifestation - the light - the tabernacle-ing of God - is not in any house of brick or mortar, not on a hilltop, mountain high. The “glory” resides quite near. Quite within. And we - for our part - are urged to live in awe of such wonder - and to advance such wonder - pursuing peace with everyone - with holiness - for our good, and for the good of the world.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*