

**Transfigured**  
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Exodus 24:12-18  
Matthew 17:1-9

Yesterday at the delegate session of Allegheny Conference we heard Pastor Alan Kauffman from Maple Grove recite several verses from John 20. He said that almost every Sunday this year his congregation will be hearing these same verses. This is called “Dwelling in the Word.”

“Dwelling in the Word” is a repeated encounter and interaction with a biblical text that allows that particular text to take on new meaning as it sinks deeper into the consciousness. Different readers give it new inflections, and over time there is new relevance and understanding as one listens to how others hear the text. To be sure, “Dwelling in the Word” is not new. The Catholic liturgy does this every day, repeating prayers, biblical texts and responses until they become a part of the faithful one. This approach, however, is relatively new for Mennonites, and we can certainly learn from it.

Though this practice intrigues me, and though this is the second Sunday in a row of hearing these scriptures from Exodus and Matthew, we are not explicitly practicing this discipline today. Last week Tim Huber, from the Peace and Justice Support Network of MC USA, helped us hear in this text from Matthew that we do not need to respond out of fear. Our fear can be transfigured. This week, the living scripture has been speaking to me in different metaphors.

What intrigues me today is the way that the Exodus and Matthew passages seem so interrelated. They both have the mysterious cloud, the voice from heaven, the

high mountain where holy people go to commune with God. Perhaps this is even where we get the term “mountain top experience.”

You probably have had an experience where something unusual, inexplicable or inspiring happened to you. Maybe you were awestruck and would rather not have come down from that mountain.

Certainly this is what Peter is interested in, capturing the moment. There is excitement — the proximity to power, three prophets all together! Elijah, Moses and Jesus — it’s not only three great men; it is the law in Moses and the prophets in Elijah. And there stands Jesus with them, embodying the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Of course you want to savor that moment. “Rabbi, this is so great, being here with you. Let me put up three tents, right here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter knows, as soon as he says it, that he is on the wrong track. The voice comes, “This is my Beloved One, listen to him.” It sort of ruins the moment, scares all his good intentions right out of him. And then it is over, it’s just Jesus. And they head back down the mountain — with Jesus telling them not to speak a word about this, until he is raised from the dead. Huh?

Generations and generations earlier, Moses climbs a mountain. He takes more than 70 elders with him and as they climb higher, Moses is instructed by God to leave all of the elders behind but Joshua. And then, going further, Moses makes the final ascent himself. He goes into the clouds.

There God talks to him; Moses receives the 10 commandments and a whole host of other laws and instructions for how to build the Ark and the tabernacle. In fact, Moses

is up there so long — 40 days and 40 nights — that the people below give up on him. He may be relishing in the time with God, but the rest of the Israelites are afraid that something has happened to him, that he will never return. In their fear of the unknown they ask for another god to worship. It doesn't take much persuading. Aaron gives in to their demands and helps the people make the golden calf.

The lectionary this morning only gives us the good and peaceful part of this Moses on the mountain story. It does not have a happy ending. It may seem cruel that Jesus tells the disciples to keep their mountain top experience to themselves, but when Moses returns he unleashes his anger on the people — definitely rated R for violence.

On this last Sunday before Lent, we are given these two mountain stories. It is on the top of the mountain that God's power is felt. It is on top of the mountain that God's voice is heard. God is revealed in a new way. The Holy is not distant. Before we enter the 40 days in the wilderness we are invited to that mountain with the disciples where the Holy is very present, with us.

So today we go to the mountain top, see Jesus, and the holy ones, fall on our faces in fear and come back down quietly (just as Jesus tells the disciples when they are with him). The mountain top experience is great, so when the good feeling wears off and we feel disillusioned, we search for a way to go back up and hope the same thing happens again.

But the trek to the mountain is not only about what happens on the top of the mountain, and how it makes us feel, it is also what happens as we come back down. We have seen the holy but now, one hopes, we also see ourselves and each other with

new eyes. It is not only that Jesus is transfigured, but that we who are witnesses are transformed as well.

As soon as the disciples come down off the mountain, a desperate man approaches Jesus asking for his child to be healed. The man says, "I brought him to your disciples and they couldn't do it." And here, right after this bonding experience on the top of the mountain, Jesus accuses the disciples of having small faith, no, he charges them with having no faith. He says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move a mountain." Hmm, which mountain?

Soon after this the disciples are asking who is the greatest in the reign of God. Have they already forgotten the mountain top incident? Maybe not. Maybe Peter, James and John think they are the greatest, after what they saw and heard on the mountain top. Jesus brings a child (small like a mustard seed?) to the center of the gathering and says that only if you are as humble as a child will you even enter the reign of God.

This is of course still a struggle for followers of Jesus. We sometimes want to rank spiritual experiences, as if one particular encounter with God is more authentic, or counts more than another. Certainly I have experienced, and perhaps some of you have too, what feels like manipulation toward the mountain or the mystical: insert your own summer campfire experience or other baggage here.

Traditionally Mennonites have tended toward believing that God speaks through reason not so much through rallies, though there have always been strands that encourage more experiences with the Holy Spirit. We who tend toward the more rational often don't know what to do when we are expected to wait for the Spirit's power to overcome us.

If we do have a mountain top experience we are often hesitant to talk about it, at least in this congregation. It is so inexplicable, perhaps emotional and not rational. Perhaps we need to find ways to give voice to our experiences of God, those experiences on the mountain.

Because what earthly use are these heavenly experiences unless we choose to respond to them, not only on the mountain top, but after we come down from the mountain. It is not only Jesus or God who is transfigured on the mountain, but we ourselves must be willing to change as we make the trek to the bottom of the hill.

It is like when Paul writes about speaking in tongues. Though it is a great gift, it is of no use unless it can be interpreted and people understand. The same could be said for mountain top experiences. What good are they if we do not allow them to change us, to shape us so that we are becoming more like that which we seek to follow, the way of Jesus.

It is a risk to go to the mountain. Once there, it is a challenge to get up off the ground and come back down. May we accept this invitation to see God and have faith as small as it may be that our lives and actions can be transformed by the experience.