

The Mountaintop

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. Luke 9:28-36

I love this mountain, this mountain-top, seeing Jesus, transfigured, joined by Moses and Elijah. I'm not alone up here. Peter, James and John, the first to see this majesty, kept it secret for a while. But after this scene was included in three of the gospels and in Peter's own writings, any faithful soul with a prayerful imagination may also ascend and see this intimate, dazzling scene.

In the event that you wonder about coming on up, let me caution you about the risk of being terrified up here. Watch out for the cloud! Surely we know it as the same cloud that led God's people Israel by day, in and through the wilderness, all those years. This same cloud later engulfed Solomon's Temple on the day that he hallowed it:

"Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." I Kings 8:6,10-11.

Although we *know* this cloud, it also becomes a cloud of *unknowing*, and of terror, for mortals who enter it, an expression of what we call the glory of the Lord, the One who created all things, the One to whom, ultimately, every knee will bow. Entering the cloud strips away, negates, petty narratives, self-serving aspirations, prideful hair-splitting about doctrines and liturgies, all earthly attachments. Hence, the terror.

Maybe you noticed that by the time the cloud comes along, Jesus is already transfigured. Moses and Elijah have already appeared, in part to reveal a continuity of the sacred story from one generation to another and also, we Christians say, to update the story, to anticipate what we now call a New Covenant.

With all of this already in view, the cloud may seem redundant. But notice that "*Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep ...*" It's a feature not found in other versions of the story. The three disciples may well have been tired, literally, but perhaps the author

intends for them to represent a liability in our human condition, our default to unconsciousness. Weighed down with sleep as we are, we rarely if ever perfectly see or comprehend, even when the luminous revelation is given. As St. Paul later observed, “...now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” As for those stand-in disciples up on the mountain, in the event that the transfiguration and the cloud had not sufficiently wakened them, a divine voice also speaks: “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*”

My own weariness and failures and inability to see notwithstanding, I feel as if I was asked to climb a mountain with you when I joined you here at Ascension, during a time of trial six years ago. It might be fair to say that plagues of betrayal, accusation and mistrust had broken out down at many of the lower elevations. Waking up one day and unexpectedly finding myself here as priest-in-charge, we began to address the most acute symptoms and outbreaks.

Regardless of circumstances and unhealed wounds and unanswered questions, every Sunday I felt invited to the top of the mountain, by way of standing at this altar, as we together remembered and summoned and offered and celebrated the holy mysteries. And from the altar, we received the holy eucharistic manna.

I would be remiss not to draw attention to the cloud at this altar – the cloud of incense, offered in remembrance of and perhaps even to summon that cloud that led God’s people by day in the wilderness, that cloud that filled the temple at its consecration and that overshadowed the mountaintop where Christ’s divine nature and glory dazzlingly shone.

Thank you for inviting me to serve as a priest at this altar. Thank you for the privilege and countless blessings of ascending to this mountaintop.

Having caught glimpses of Christ transfigured on the mountaintop, parts of me wish that the story of Jesus could end here. Down at the bottom of the mountain and outside the church’s doors there is still trouble – wars and rumors of wars, blindness and denial, greed, hunger, violence, and so much fear. Jesus will soon return down from the mountaintop, and knowingly so. He will go down to confront all of it, to continue to teach, minister, heal and exorcize, to proclaim hope and love amidst all of it. And then, through his betrayal, Passion and death on a cross, he will be overshadowed by all of it, in order to remake and redeem all of it.

You and I may linger here on the mountaintop for a while, and we should do so if we can, savor the revelation, take it to heart, even the accompanying terror. But we must know that, soon enough, Jesus will head down the mountain. As he does so, he will look over his shoulder to catch your eye and mine: *Come with me, to Jerusalem.*

We will do our best to follow him, to return down the mountain with him, to take our part in his mission of redemption and love. We will persevere down there in part because we have been here, on this mountaintop, and here we have been blessed, renewed and sustained by seeing him in his transfigured glory. *Amen.*