

From Mountain Top to Mountain Top

A sermon on Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18; & 1 Kings 18:1-19:13 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 August 2020

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Message

The stories of Moses, Elijah and Jesus on various mountain tops reveals a process of God's self-revelation as the one who loves us and suffers for us.

Sermon

According to much of religious tradition, including parts of the Bible, a global pandemic is an expression of the angry judgement of God who sends earthquakes, fires and plagues to punish us. These ideas sneak into the gospel story we heard tonight through the presence of Moses and Elijah. They sneak in and are challenged.

The transfiguration of Jesus takes place on a mountain top, and both Moses and Elijah have crucial mountain top stories too. I suggest that if we draw a line through these three mountain top experiences, that line will point to the path Jesus calls us to follow in our frightened and stricken world.

The connections between the transfiguration and the story of Moses receiving the law go further than just the presence of Moses. Both stories also emphasise six days elapsing before the main event, and both feature the voice of God speaking from a cloud of glory that covers the mountain.

So what's the point? Well, one real possibility is that when the voice from the cloud says, "This Jesus is my beloved son, listen to him," it actually means listen to him in contrast to the things that Moses and Elijah might have said.

To Moses, "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain." After last summer, we know about devouring fires. God is being seen as a terrifying, out-of-control power who brings instant death to anyone who puts a foot wrong.

Seeing God that way has always produced codes of religious law that cover every detail of life and have extreme punishments for breaches, because any slip-up could unleash a pandemic. Thus Moses comes down the mountain with ten commandments and four hundred and four sub-clauses so that people can avoid igniting the divine rage and being destroyed.

Elijah too has a fire on the mountain story and voice on the mountain story, but this time a new picture of God is beginning to emerge. Elijah is an aggressive my-God-can-beat-your-god type, and he's a big believer in death for the losers. Surely we are serving God if we kill God's enemies, thinks Elijah, so when he wins the whose-god-can-send-fire-from-heaven competition, and all the people are cheering him, he promptly slaughters four hundred and fifty prophets of the losing god.

Usually when we hear that story, we stop there, and the next bit is heard as a different story. But it is not. Immediately after his big public victory, Elijah slumps into a deep depression and wants to die. Something is seriously wrong and God orders him up another mountain and promises to make his true self known to Elijah. There is a cyclone, followed by an earthquake, but God was not in them. Then there was a fire. Elijah was pretty sure that fire was God's big

thing, but no, God was not in the fire either. And then there was something that words can't make sense of – a “sound” of sheer silence. And when Elijah heard it he covered his face and knew he was in the presence of God.

No wonder he covered his face. He's just slaughtered four hundred and fifty human beings because he thought it would please the jealous God of fire, and now he realises that he'd got God all wrong.

The transfiguration, we are told, comes just six days – remember the “six days” connection? – after “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the religious authorities, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Back then it had been Peter who, full of Elijah-like zeal for a god who triumphs and slaughters his enemies, rebuked Jesus and tried to tell him that such a fate could never befall the messiah.

So now on the mountain top Peter is hearing a voice from the cloud saying “Listen to him.” Don't tell him what you think being a messiah should be like. Listen to him. Listen to this one who will not slaughter enemies, nor send plagues on those who cannot live up to the law. Listen to this one who, far from sending fire, walks resolutely into the devouring fire of human hatred and hostility to reveal to us once and for all that God does not will the destruction of anyone, but will willingly suffer the full force of human violence for love of us.

And thus, after six days of telling them that God so loved the world that he must suffer and die for it, Jesus stands now on the mountain, between two representatives of these old violent misunderstandings of God. And now, from this mountain he points the way forward to yet another mountain, or is it just a hill this time?

Another hill top that will this time be covered with a cloud of darkness. Another hill top where he will again be seen “in all his glory” between two dead men, as he is hung up to die. Another hill top where again a voice will say “Surely this is the son of God,” although this time the truth will be voiced by a confused pagan soldier.

Another hill top, to which we ourselves are led by the one who in those six days also said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” A hill top where, finally and definitively, the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased demonstrates that God's only involvement in violence and death is to suffer it for love of us.

So that line, drawn from mountain top to mountain top to mountain top, is a line that Jesus calls us to follow, that we might be set free from fear and know ourselves beloved, and that we might cast ourselves into the outstretched, loving, tortured arms of the God who is entirely and unchangingly love and mercy and grace.