

FIRST LESSON: Exodus 24:12-18  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 17:1-9  
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## ***“Mountaintop”***

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If we were more familiar with the Old Testament, our ears would be ringing with the parallels in the story of the transfiguration. Jesus climbed a high mountain that is unnamed. Moses went up Mount Sinai. Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain. In the beginning of Exodus 24 we learn that Moses took three men, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, all of whom were later ordained as priests. The Lord called to Moses from the cloud, and in Deuteronomy the Lord says to the people of Moses, “You shall listen to him.” (Deuteronomy 18:15) A voice came from a cloud on the mount of transfiguration and spoke to the three disciples about Jesus, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” In Exodus we learn that “when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.” (Exodus 34: 29-30) Jesus’ face and clothing shone with a blinding light, and the disciples were afraid.

Mountaintops are scary places! In the ancient imagination they were places where heaven and earth coincided. And the words spoken out of the cloud to the disciples are identical with the words spoken at Jesus’ baptism with one addition, “Listen to him.” “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. **Listen to him.**”

We don’t have a department in our brain in which to put overwhelming supernatural experiences. The people in Moses’ time might have been more predisposed to the creation of such a department, because EVERYTHING at the time was connected to one or more deities. Storms, floods and famines all came under the category of the divine. And direct experiences were almost expected. But by the 1<sup>st</sup> century fiery pillars in the wilderness, burning bushes and the voice of God speaking out of clouds was no longer expected. That stuff happened a long time ago. Jesus was, well he was just Jesus! He was real, and concrete and human. You could sit down with Jesus and eat a meal. Nothing weird happened, except maybe the miracles. The miracles were pretty amazing, but they didn’t come with a light show. This was different. This was just pure terrifying.

Peter tried to come up with an answer—something reasonable to say in the midst of the incomprehensible. He was cut off mid-sentence. What he

suggested was that he create three sukkahs or temporary structures for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. We don't know why he came up with this idea, because it was not the time for Sukkot. Sukkahs, sometimes translated booths, were small huts made of tree branches. They were temporary dwellings. Every year during the Festival of Sukkot the Jews then and now celebrated by setting up temporary dwellings to remember the forty years spent in the wilderness. The reason why Peter *might* have thought of them even though it was *not* Sukkot, is that these same structures were set up in the encampment around Mount Sinai when Moses went up the mountain. The association was there. The similarities were striking, and Peter was rattled.

There are some other possibilities behind Peter's suggestion. He may have wanted the experience to last, or expected that it would. After all, Moses spent a long time on Mount Sinai. He could have even thought that Moses and Elijah were going to come down and join Jesus in triumph in bringing in the kingdom of God. Whatever was going on in his mind, the experience was overwhelming. Peter's suggestion was ignored, BUT, Jesus did not reprimand him for it.

Peter often gets disparaged for his response. He's accused of blundering around and coming up with stupid ideas. But under the circumstances I don't think any of us would have done any better. Peter recognized that this was a direct experience of the divine, like what happened on Mount Sinai. He had known Jesus as a human. Now he was experiencing Jesus as God. It was not necessarily a comforting experience. It was terrifying and overwhelming. To realize that spiritually they were walking where Moses had walked, seeing miraculous things and hearing the voice of God was not just any spiritual experience. This was a once in 5000 years spiritual experience. Nothing in their lives had prepared them for this. The idea that the bible stories they had grown up with might actually happen to *them* was never a consideration. And the three of them, Peter, James and John, were going to need to remember this in the days ahead. They had been given a vision to hold on to when darkness descended.

I have had a few times in my life when I have felt the presence of God in such a tangible way that it changed me, but I've never had a mountaintop experience like this. I have never seen God or heard God's voice. The times when I felt God's presence the clearest came when I was at my lowest. The sense that God was beside me was so strong it gave me strength to get up the next day and carry on. And when times of busyness and doubt come I can take those memories out and hold them up to the light. I know it was real. There is no doubt. I received strength and determination that I didn't have. And I am grateful. I just wish it didn't always have to be the worst times in my life. Jesus gave these three men an experience they could hold up to the light and remember. He gave it to them before the darkness. He knew what was ahead. He always does. They did not.

One of the things commercial Christianity mega church style does is create excitement. It's all about designing an **experience**. And they know exactly what they are doing. There is a science to it. They know how many songs to sing and what beat to choose. They know to move toward matching

the heart rate to maximize suggestibility before the offering is taken. Studies have been done about the spiritual “high” people get worshipping in these carefully crafted services. Worshipers at megachurches have a release of oxytocin, which gives a sense of euphoria. This so called “spiritual experience” is all chemical. And it’s achieved by the careful use of music, charismatic celebrity pastors, appeals to emotion over thought, dancing, singing, spontaneous “miracles” of healing and even the use of specific verbal techniques. Lawyers do the same thing in their summing up arguments. **They know what they are doing.** They are creating a market. They are creating a feel-good experience that will keep people coming back for more and make them hand over their money without question. They are creating congregations who are addicted.

And people who attend mega churches or aspiring mega churches don’t realize they are being manipulated into a trance state during these worship services, because trance is a very natural for us. Who hasn’t been driving their car when they suddenly realized that they zoned out miles ago and missed the turn-off, or arrived home with no memory of how they got there? How many husbands have found that they have said “Yes dear” so many times they agreed to something and have no idea what it is? Like it or not, we are easily controlled by outside forces. Politicians, cults and revivalist preachers do it all the time.

I don’t think anyone has ever found Penn Wynne Presbyterian Church addictive. Endearing maybe, but not addictive! I just don’t match up to the superstar hype, and admittedly gender is also against me. Our music is just our music. We have fun and we give it our best shot. We certainly don’t make the beat coincide with the offering.

The experience Jesus gave the disciples was real. It was heart stoppingly real. They had been scared out of their wits. Jesus had to reassure them not to be afraid. And the experiences I have had of God were also not manipulated by outside forces. I was alone. No music. No preacher. No exciting miraculous alleged healings. I experienced God because everything **had** been stripped away. And that is the difference between real faith and Sunday morning entertainment. But a form of Christianity that is built on feeling good is not Christianity. God is with us on the mountaintop and in the valley, when we can feel God, and when we cannot. Amen.

Exodus 24:12-18

<sup>12</sup> The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.”

<sup>13</sup> Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup> He said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them.”

<sup>15</sup> When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, <sup>16</sup> and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. <sup>17</sup> To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on

top of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

<sup>17</sup> After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.<sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”