

COME TO THE MOUNTAIN
Rev. Dennis Kelly

When I was a child, I lived in fear of mountains, especially the kind that had the potential to erupt. When my family lived in Naples, Italy, we could see Mt. Vesuvius which is just a few miles away. Vesuvius is an active volcano and most famous for burying the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in mountains of fiery ash in 79 A.D.

On one family trip, we visited the ruins of Pompeii. Guides told us stories of what happened to that city long ago. I imagined what it must have been like to be a young child at that time. I didn't want that to happen to me. So I was always worried that Vesuvius would erupt once again and bury Naples in the same way. I wanted nothing to do with that mountain. I wanted nothing to do with any mountain.

That changed, however, as I grew older and grew to appreciate the wonder and splendor of mounts. That transition took place between my sophomore and junior years in college. Some friends and I decided to take a road trip to Colorado. So we leaded up the car and began that long trek across Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska along Interstate #80.

There isn't really much to see on that part of the trip – pretty much nothing but corn and wheat fields. That same scenery continues pretty much for the first 100 miles on Interstate 76 after it splits off of I80 towards Denver. But then, all of a sudden, you begin to see the Rocky Mountain range appear in the distance. Even in the summer time – you can see the glacial snow at the tops of some of the mountains. With each passing mile, those mountains grow larger and larger, until they are no longer driving towards the mountains; you are driving in the mountains.

We stayed in a campground near Estes Park and spent several days exploring Rocky Mountain National Park. One day, in particular, we decided to take a trail from Bear Lake to Flat Top mountain. It wasn't the most difficult trail in the park, but it was a hike up and back that took a good part of the day. As we followed the path, the evergreen trees gave way to the scrub trees. Then the scrub trees gave way to rocks and snow. And then finally there was a sign that indicated that we had reached the Continental Divide.

Having reached our goal – we decided to stay for a while and take in the sights. The 360-degree view was spectacular. We could see mountains and lakes that were over a hundred miles away! The wind and the air up there was so strange – coming at you from all directions. Yet the air is so much thinner that sometimes you needed to breath deep to fill your lungs.

There was also a profound sense of silence and loneliness. We didn't see many people up there. There weren't a lot of other creatures either – just an occasional hawk rising

up from the valleys below. It was also a mystical experience. Standing on the top of a mountain, you get a sense of how tiny and insignificant we humans can be – and how awesome is God's great creation.

In that moment on Flattop Mountain, I could understand how human beings throughout history have believed that the mountains were sacred places where the gods dwelled and where you needed to go if you wanted to experience God.

Mountains can also instill a sense of fear in human beings, especially those, like Mt. Vesuvius, that rumble and shake. Some mountains can also instill a sense of awe. It is not surprising, then, that many significant biblical narratives involve mountaintop experiences.

In the Old Testament narrative of Moses, there are several mountaintop experiences. Moses encounters God for the first time at Mt. Horeb where he becomes aware of God's presence in the midst of a burning bush. It is there that God extends the call to Moses to deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians.

Moses encounters God once again on Mount Sinai. There he experiences God in the midst of clouds and shadows. Moses is given the Ten Commandments and is directed to these commandments to the Israelites who are in the midst of their 40 year wilderness experience. Our First Reading for this morning is taken from the very end of this mountain-top narrative.

Moses encounters God one final time on a mountain named Nebo. This encounter comes at the end of the wilderness journey as the Israelites are about to enter into the Promised Land. Moses is shown the promised land but is told that he will not accompany the Israelites into that land. The work of Moses has come to an end. Tradition says that Moses died on Mt. Nebo though no one knows where he is buried. Some Jews believe that Moses did not die, but was taken directly into heaven from the top of this mountain.

The prophet Elijah also had a number of significant mountaintop experiences. It is on Mount Horeb where Elijah waits to experience God. But the Lord does not come to him in the expected ways of wind, earthquake or fire. Elijah discovers the presence of God in the midst of the silence.

Mountains also play an important role in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel narratives of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, there are several chapters that together are called The Sermon on the Mount. It is there on the mountain where Jesus offers the words that are known as the Beatitudes.

There are several occasions throughout his ministry that Jesus needs to get away from the crowds and the expectations. Jesus would go up on a hill or a mountain to refresh and recharge his energies through prayer. Sometimes he takes some of his disciples with him. Sometimes he goes away by himself.

Most significant to us today is the mountaintop experience that is narrated in our Gospel lesson for today. It is the story of the Transfiguration. In this story three disciples see Jesus in a new and powerful way. It is an experience that transforms their lives and their understanding of who Jesus really is. It is a narrative that we read every year at the end of Epiphany and just before the beginning of Lent.

Jesus invites Peter, James and John to travel with him up a mountain to pray. While he is praying his face begins to change and his clothes become dazzling white. In scriptures, objects that are bright and white are often objects which represent the sacred and holy.

Though exhausted from their journey and nearly asleep, the disciples see two figures appear, Moses and Elijah, who are talking to Jesus. All three are engulfed in this experience of brightness and holiness. The topic of their conversation we are told is the future and what Jesus will face when he enters into Jerusalem.

This is an experience that is almost more than the three disciples can handle or understand. It is also an experience that they do not want to end. Peter, in fact, wants to capture the moment by making three dwelling places for Moses, Elijah and Jesus to stay so that they can worship all three on this mountain.

However, the Lord has other plans. So the brightness of this experience is brought to an end by a cloud that overshadows them. And the voice of the Lord comes to them from this cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him." Other versions or translations say, "this is my Son, My Beloved, listen to him." It will be some time before the disciples begin to fully understand these words. That understanding will come after his death and resurrection. All that is left for them to do is come down off the mountain and continue their journey with Jesus.

The lives of Peter, James and John are transformed by this mountaintop experience. They see Jesus in a new way. This transformation is only the beginning of the many ways that they see God at work through Jesus and in their lives.

Mountaintop experiences are moments when human beings experience God in deep and significant ways. When the experience is over, you see the world around you in a different way. These are God moments that can transform your lives.

Have you ever experienced one of those God-moments? Do you take time to intentionally seek those God-moments? Do you even believe that you could have such a mystical experience with God; holy and sacred moments where the experience of God surround us, even in the midst of daily life?

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we are invited and encouraged to become more aware of all the potential God-moments in your life. Stop and look at what is happening around you. Seek experiences that draw you closer to God. Pray for guidance to see recognize these God- moments. Give thanks to God when they occur. See Jesus in a new way. I

believe that holy and sacred God-moments are all around us if only we have the eyes to see them and the ears to listen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.