

Pinnacles of Glory: A Bible Mountain Top Tour

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Ottawa Mennonite Church

Transfiguration Sunday – March 6, 2011

Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

Welcome

Welcome to *Pinnacles of Glory: A Bible Mountain Top Tour*. My name is Sarah and I will be your guide this morning. For your safety, please keep both feet firmly planted on the floor and your hands and arms inside the cable car at all times. In case of emergency, please use the exits to the rear of the car. Parachutes are not available but prayers are encouraged. If you require assistance at any time the Ottawa Mennonite team of deacons serving you today would be happy to help. On our journey this morning we will visit four historic summits covering approximately 18000km and 6000 years. Please relax and enjoy the ride.

Ascent

As we prepare to ascend our first peak, I invite you to reflect on the last time you visited a mountain. Perhaps you explored the Rockies when spending time with family out West. Maybe you climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, snow shoed through the Adirondacks, or skied in the Alps. Perhaps your most recent mountain visit was closer to home. In the words of CBC Radio's Stuart McLean:

No one ever gasps in awe when they see the Laurentian Mountains for the first time. First time visitors who spend a morning being toured through the Laurentians are more apt to...ask that mortifying question so many have asked before: "When do we get to the mountains?"...The Laurentians roll rather than tower. And they roll with a dignity that befits one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. The Laurentians...make you feel that there is both comfort and constancy to be had in this constantly changing world.¹

Mountains, wherever they are, whatever the size, often make us feel things. They open us up. Maybe it's the cleaner air, or the distance from the realities that ground us, or looking out over a world that is so much larger than that which we usually see. Mountains create space to pause, take a deep breath, and open ourselves to something more.

Mount Sinai: Meeting Mystery

As the cable car slows, I invite you to direct your attention to the rear right hand windows. In the distance we see Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. Most likely located in modern day Egypt, this peak is well known as a favorite retreat of Moses, of burning bush, "let my people go," and Ten Commandments fame.

The top of the mountain is hard to see this morning through the blowing snow, admittedly unusual weather for this part of the world. However, this is not the first time the peak has been obscured. When God met Moses on this mountain, the mountain was cloaked in cloud: a cloud the people called the glory of God, a cloud that marked the presence of God. The cloud is described as "thick darkness" (Exodus 20:21) and compared to "devouring fire" (Exodus 24:17).

Often we hope encounters with God, mountain top spiritual experiences, will be moments of clarity and understanding. Perhaps, more often, they are moments of thick darkness or devouring fire, moments of meeting mystery.

¹ Stuart McLean. "The Cottage." *Home from the Vinyl Café*. Viking, 1998.

The mystery of God cannot be reduced to a puzzle. The mystery of God cannot be limited to the experience of wonder. The mystery of God is not “suspense until we know the final outcome;” or “respect [for] ... that which we do not understand.”² Rather, the mystery of God is the *absolute otherness of God*. The mystery of God is that God is in a different category from anything and everything else. On the mountain top, the mystery of God that is, “incomprehensibly beyond [us,]” becomes “utterly near to us.”³ Meeting mystery is transcendence becoming immanent.

There’s a bit more to the Pinnacles of Glory tour than your bargained for, isn’t there? Now, please take a secure hold on a guard rail as we soar across several millennia.

A Metaphorical Mountain: Meeting Mysticism

Can everyone see our second peak to the left of the cable car? I certainly hope not! Because this mountain is pure metaphor. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (expectant parents: keep this name in mind!) will serve as our guide for the next portion of the tour.

The author writing under the name Dionysius the Areopagite in sixth century Syria describes mystical experience using the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. Dionysius wrote that we connect with God through a mystical ascent into a cloud of unknowing, into “divine darkness.” As we ascend the mountain of God, more and more of our descriptors of God fall away:

God is...not body, not figure, not form, not what has quality, quantity, or mass, not in space, not visible, not...anything else which pertains to what is sensed.⁴

Then Dionysius goes a step further:

God is... not soul, not intellect, not imagination, opinion, reason and not understanding,...not knowledge, not truth, not king, not wisdom, not one, not unity, not divinity, not goodness, not spirit..., not sonhood, not fatherhood, not something other which is known by us or some other beings.⁵

Dionysius really covers all the bases! God cannot be known, according to Dionysius, but God can be experienced. The God Dionysius experiences is truly mysterious, truly Other, and thus utterly glorious.

Mount Herman: Meeting Christ in Glory

Speaking of glory, we are now gliding back in time about five hundred years to our third Pinnacle of Glory. Welcome to Mount Herman! You can see the summit just southwest of the cable car. On the border between contemporary Syria and Lebanon, Mount Herman is currently home to one of the few ski resorts in the region. Perhaps more relevant to our purposes, it is one possible site of the Transfiguration.

Transfiguration translates the Greek word that is the root of metamorphosis: caterpillar is to butterfly as Jesus of Nazareth is to Transfigured Christ. Three of Jesus’ closest followers were invited to witness the event. Peter, James and John were used to walking long distances with Jesus but this was a tough hike even for them. Yet when they reached the summit it was worth it: Jesus shining in glory; Jesus talking with the great prophets of the tradition, Moses and Elijah; Jesus being immersed in the shimmering cloud of God’ presence; Jesus being called “Son” by God’s own voice; Jesus being given authority that must be obeyed, “Listen to him!” God says. No wonder Peter, James and John fell to the

² Gail Ramshaw. *Under the Tree of Life: The Religion of a Feminist Christian*. Continuum, 1998. 43.

³ Nathan Mitchell. *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments*. Orbis Books, 2006. xi.

⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite. “The Mystical Theology.” Trans. John D. Jones. *Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Marquette University Press, 1980. 219.

⁵ Ibid. 221.

ground in fear and awe! Yet they soon found themselves alone again with their friend who came over, helped them up, and led them down the mountain. On this mountain Peter, James and John met mystery. They encountered the glory of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses and Elijah, and discovered that this glory is fused with the glory of Christ.

Matthew describes glory with vivid visual imagery: “his face shone like the sun,” “his clothes became dazzling white,” “a bright cloud overshadowed them.”⁶ We recognize these images of glory, of God’s presence on Mount Herman, from our visit to Mount Sinai. Most of us could probably name these visual images of glory.

Today I have a different question for you: *What does glory smell like?* Is glory that whiff of crispness that drifts by on an autumn breeze? Is glory the sweet aroma of freshly baked cookies that enfolds you when you cross the kitchen threshold? Is glory the tangy, salty, sweaty sent of a match well played? Is glory the smell, or perhaps devouring fire, of a spicy Indian curry? What does glory smell like?

We cannot capture what we smell for re-sniffing later the same way we can capture what we see in a photograph. However, we have a powerful memory for scents. It is said a familiar smell can evoke a long-forgotten memory of a person or event. The smell from the World War I trench simulation at the Imperial War Museum lingered in my nostrils for years. Occasionally, most often on an autumn morning, I catch a whiff of “cottage,” the memory of childhood family vacations.

Perhaps God’s glory, God’s presence, is like a smell: *we cannot capture it but we can remember it.* On mount Herman, we discover a smell once associated only with the God of the Hebrew Bible is now emanating from Jesus. Jesus is wearing God’s perfume. We see Jesus in a new, yet ancient, light. We breathe deeply a fresh yet familiar scent: the smell of glory.

As the cable car circles around the far side of the summit, we can see the place where we suspect Peter was hoping to pitch those tents. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain, to capture the glory of God. Yet Jesus led Peter back down the mountain, showing him the difficult road ahead. We too may want to linger in our mountain experiences, to capture the glory of God. Yet we also must descend from the heights to follow whatever road lies ahead.

The Mountain Top: Meeting Martin Luther King Jr

Oh! My ears are popping! The descent to our fourth and final peak is steep one, although it also covers a great distance, bringing us back to North America. The last mountain on our tour is about the height of this pulpit. It is, in fact, another pulpit in a different time and place. 1968. Memphis, Tennessee.

Some of you may remember this mountaintop. If we were not trapped in a cable car, I would tell you to go home youtube it right now. Unfortunately, you will have to settle for hearing an excerpt from me instead. In his last speech, given the night before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Junior spoke these words:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm

⁶ Matthew 17:2, 5

happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any [one.] Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁷

If Martin Luther King had not been to the mountain top, if he had not met mystery, if he had not seen the glory of God, I do not think he could have walked the difficult road of his life. If he had not invited so many others to the mountain top with him, I think the world would be a very different place.

Journeying to the mountaintop is not an esoteric mystical exercise disconnected from everyday reality. Journeying to the mountaintop is the foundation of concrete action and grounded hope. King reminds us of the power of mountaintop experiences to give us the courage to come down from the mountain and do the hard work of journeying to the promised land, in our relationships, and our communities, and our world.

With Moses, we come down from the mountain to live lives guided by God's loving commandments. With Jesus, we come down from the mountain to begin the journey to the cross. With Martin Luther King, we come down from the mountain to do the hard work of advocating for justice for all people.

Descent

As we begin our final descent, I invite you to reflect on the mountaintops you have visited in your own journey so far. Some of our mountain ranges may look more like the Laurentians than the Himalayas. Some of us may see only a few hazy peaks as we look back over our shoulders across the plains. Some of us may be experienced climbers clinging to a sheer rock face. Some of us may be dwelling in deep canyons. What is landscape of your life of faith? Have you met mystery? Have you smelled glory?

As we make our final descent, we see a road stretching ahead of us. We are coming down from the brilliant glory of mountain of Epiphany and entering the shadowy honesty of the valley of Lent. The cross will soon be before us. Yet perhaps, even on the plains and in the valleys we can occasionally catch a whiff of glory on the wind.

Farewell

We have now reached our final destination. Please remain seated until the cable car comes to a complete halt. I would be happy to answer any questions once we disembark. Thank you for choosing *Bible Mountain Top Tours*. I hope you enjoyed our journey and have a great day!

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. "I've been to the mountaintop." Memphis, Tennessee. April 3, 1968.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1L8y-MX3pg>