

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Exodus 32 and Mark 9: 2-13 “Only Jesus”

When we first moved to Colorado over ten years ago, we attended Covenant Presbyterian church for a while in Colorado Springs. It sits on a rise with an unobstructed view of Pike’s Peak. We arrived for an evening service on one occasion, sun had gone down, sky a darkening blue. It was a pleasant evening though there were clouds hovering right around the mountain’s peak. And as we were getting out of the car, Hudson got real quiet and was clearly worried about something and kept glancing towards Pike’s Peak. We finally pried out of him what the matter was. Obviously, he had learned about volcanoes, and there this giant volcano, to his mind, was smoking right in front of us, preparing to erupt. While we sympathized about the likeness, that it did kind of look like a smoking volcano, we assured him we were safe, the mountain was not going to blow at any moment.

Our scriptures speak to a momentous moment on a mountain. In the Exodus narrative, the mountain was shrouded in clouds when Moses met with God there. And the Israelites, like a little Hudson, too started to worry, wondering whether it was good, or something dark was brewing. It was in their fear of being alone, in their uncertainty that they act to make an idol for God. The moment had its darkness and blunders, like an embarrassing memory. But the Sinai time will be ensconced into their history and memory as almost idyllic, of God is present with them and covenanting with them.

Mountains have a significance in the bible, largely because of the Sinai covenant, or at least that is my theory. Mountains are significant for many reasons. They punctuate a landscape and so they naturally act as markers, especially for people without google maps. They are the dramatic high points and so make their way into poetic imagery and the use of merisms, such as high and low, mountains and plains, east and west. Anyone who has summited a mountain and looked in all directions knows there is a special experience associated with it. Mountains grant a particular perspective, and vantage point. But it was the moment at Mt. Sinai that really shapes mountain language in the bible, with God’s encounter with Moses and the solidifying of the covenant and the giving of the ten commandments and the instructions for the tabernacle.

There are other mountains in the bible, often a significant event is described as taking place on a mount, even though it may not be a particularly remarkable

mountain in terms of height or dramatic features, such as the mount of olives, or Jesus going to knoll for the sermon on the mount. There are other mountains where God gives view of the promised land, such as Mt. Gerazim and Mt. Nebo. But the most significant mountains get conflated with and draw their associations with Mt. Sinai and the establishment of the covenant. There is Mt. Moriah where Abraham is called to offer his son, but a ram is provided instead. And there is Mt. Zion, Jerusalem, where the temple and worship is established. And in tradition, these three are sometimes conflated, understood to be the same mountain, Zion, in Jerusalem.

Our story of the transfiguration is drawing on the Sinai tradition, where God met with Moses on the mountain, covered in clouds, and Moses comes down his face glowing from the encounter with God's presence. It is this high moment that signifies God is renewing God's covenant and purposes in some way, it associates Jesus with the great figures of God's revelation and movement in the past and with the expectations for God's messiah and fulfillment of God's covenant in the future. The transfiguration associates Jesus with the prime event of revelation and covenant.

Now a high moment, a dramatic event, it lingers for a while, but it does not last. You might think about your own moments of beauty or clarity or pure enjoyment in your life. How do you maintain the memory and connection with that moment. How you maintain your connection with God, with the importance of the mountaintop moments in your life? We even use that expression, "to come down." To physically come down a mountain, or to emotionally come down from the excitement or energy of a particular experience. Our emotional or experiential ups and downs reflect the physical ups and downs of the mountain.

But, how do you maintain your sense of God' ongoing presence and significance once you come down, once the intense moment of experience is passed? Do you write it down, so you don't forget? Do you take a little stone home from the mountain as a memento, or hang a picture on your wall or as the wallpaper on your phone or computer screen, or do you keep telling story to others as a way of reinforcing its significance? Probably all of these things. And certainly, Israel does all of these things.

And these are important, because as you come down from the mountain and back to life, the stress and chaos and distractions all afront you and it is hard to hang on to that clarity and purity of the mountain experience. Like when you come home from a lovely vacation, or weekend away with good friends, you know the dynamic, you find that your pipes burst in the house, or crap hit the fan at work, or

some other wave of stress. You say things like, “I need a vacation to recover from my vacation.” In the Exodus reading, Moses comes down to the chaos of the golden calf incident. In the Transfiguration they come down and immediately are confronted with a boy whose life and well-being are threatened by a demon and is in need of help. And then Jesus starts telling of his coming suffering. Straight from a serene moment into the muddy chaos of human need and dysfunction.

In our first installment of “Totems, Monuments, and memorials” a few weeks ago, we talked about this passage. We talked of the significance of images or idols as representations of God’s presence with them and the sense of God’s ongoing purposes at work for them. You see, while we tend to think abstractly, and conceive of God being with us even though we can see, touch, hear, smell, or taste, the biblical people are concrete thinkers, and are really attentive to tangible ways to perceive God’s presence among them. The physical representation creates a type of local to perceive that God is actually with them. I described it like a radio, receiving the invisible radio ways and making them accessible through this observable and tangible thing.

So, when Moses doesn’t come down the mountain, and the people are afraid they are all alone in a harsh landscape, they go about making an image, an idol, of God to make God’s presence once again observable and palpable – the golden calf. So they would know they are not alone. Ironically, God is planning to provide his own image that will reassure them of his presence with them, the stone tablets with the ten commandments on them – a new physical representation, though abiding by the second commandment and not an image of God himself, which the golden calf was. The reality is that God would give them ways of being visibly and tangibly reminded of God’s presence, such as the cloud by day and fire by night.

In the transfiguration story there is similar response, a concern, how to mark and remember and make sacred this place and this moment, so that this divine visitation is marked and remembered in tangible ways. And so, the disciples’ immediate response is to want to build shrines to each of the three pivotal figures, thus ensconcing Jesus in the ranks of Moses and Elijah, a worship site on a mount where people will come, marking the place, telling the story, keeping it alive. They say let us make a dwelling, a “house of God,” which is what Jacob does after his dream of a ladder into heaven, and he calls the stone memorial Bethel, the house of God.

But the voice from heaven essentially says no. This is my son listen to him. “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!””

Listen to him, rather than see some physical stone, image, or idol. There is for Israel, an importance placed on hearing. God often privileges hearing, listening and following God's word, God's voice, rather than seeing and operating by your own judgement. In the Exodus story, even though God is giving them a tangible representation, these stone tablets with the ten commandments, the focus is on instruction, on their listening to God's direction.

And as the disciples are on the mountain of the transfiguration, they hear the call to listen to Jesus, and as they go down the mountain, all the light and clouds and ambiance disband, and we hear, "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." If you want a reminder of the experience, look to Jesus. If you want a representation of God's presence among you, look to Jesus.

When you come down from the mountain of an ecstatic experience, how will we remember, how will we mark it, how will we know God is still with us, and that his purposes still go forward. "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." How will they keep the memory of that moment alive, listen to him, God's beloved Son.

As we move into the season of lent, with its themes of darkness and penitence, we follow that movement, coming down from the mountain, into the world of our need, moving towards the cross. And as we do so, how will we remember that God has visited us, that God is with us even in our frailty, in our vulnerability, in the muddiness of our sin, need, and dysfunction? How will we be reminded that we are not alone? "Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."

As we move closer to the cross in this season of Lent, we do so with a sense of surrender. We don't make an image of God that seems good to our senses. We don't direct God's actions in ways that fit our understandings. We follow, we let him instruct us, we accept what he must do, letting this incarnate representation of God be to us the reminders and comfort we need.

And all God's people said... Amen.



### *The Transfiguration*

*(Mt 17:1–8; Lk 9:28–36; 2 Pet 1:16–18)*

<sup>2</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” <sup>8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

### *The Coming of Elijah*

*(Mt 17:9–13)*

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. <sup>11</sup> Then they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” <sup>12</sup> He said to them, “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? <sup>13</sup> But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.”

**Dazzling A Blessing for Transfiguration Sunday by Jan Richardson**

Believe me, I know  
how tempting it is  
to remain inside this blessing,  
to linger where everything  
is dazzling  
and clear.

We could build walls  
around this blessing,  
put a roof over it.  
We could bring in  
a table, chairs,  
have the most amazing meals.  
We could make a home.  
We could stay.

But this blessing  
is built for leaving.  
This blessing  
is made for coming down  
the mountain.  
This blessing  
wants to be in motion,  
to travel with you  
as you return  
to level ground.

It will seem strange  
how quiet this blessing becomes  
when it returns to earth.  
It is not shy.  
It is not afraid.

It simply knows  
how to bide its time,  
to watch and wait,  
to discern and pray

until the moment comes  
when it will reveal  
everything it knows,  
when it will shine forth  
with all it has seen,  
when it will dazzle  
with the unforgettable light  
you have carried  
all this way.



**Exodus 32:***The Golden Calf**(Deut 9:6–29)*

**32** When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” <sup>2</sup> Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” <sup>6</sup> They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup> they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ” <sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup> Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. <sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.”

## Exodus 24

<sup>12</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” <sup>13</sup> So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup> To the elders he had said, “Wait here

for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. <sup>16</sup> The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. <sup>17</sup> Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. <sup>18</sup> Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.