

Exodus 24: 12-18  
2 Peter 1:16-21  
Matthew 17: 1-9

Seeing a Myth  
March 2, 2014  
Mary R. Brownlow

At 8000 feet of altitude, the walker really starts to notice some physiological changes. Depending on the person, of course. The heart beats a little faster. It's easy to get short of breath. And it's definitely cooler up there. As you climb, it does not get easier. The heart goes like a trip hammer after just 20 paces. Some people get disoriented, or a little sick. The summit of Mount Hermon, traditionally believed to be the site of the transfiguration story in the Gospels, is 9232 feet above sea level. Snow is found at the top for most of the year.

So I am imagining the thoughts and feelings of Peter and James and John on that spring morning, in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century. I am sure that they were good hikers, or had become so once they started following Jesus. From Capernaum, their home base, to Caesarea Philippi, was about 40 miles. That is where they were the week before, when Jesus provoked those heavy conversations about his identity, and what it meant to be a Messiah, and what it meant to be a follower. There had been a shadow over their fellowship ever since. Now they were walking again, straight uphill.

As I said, they were strong walkers. But it's different up there. These guys were used to life at sea level, or below. Even strong walkers slow down. Even strong walkers wonder if they can keep up. Even strong walkers get a little woozy. And that snow – so bright with the sun shining on it! No wonder they “saw” things and “heard” things. No wonder they had a vision. That's what limited oxygen can do.

Transfiguration Sunday is an exclamation point on the season of Epiphany. During this season, we have celebrated the ways that people perceived Jesus as God's Child, God's Anointed One, the Light of the World. From Bethlehem to the Jordan Valley, from the waters of birth to the waters of baptism, from the Sermon on the Mount to the Mount of Transfiguration, we listen to reports of those moments of insight or clarity or wonder, to visions in the night and words from on high. Our stories say, “a star shone up there,” “God spoke here,” “a dove was seen there,” and something important happened. Elusive signposts to a greater story almost too big for us to hear. And to the modern mind comes the question: Did that really happen? Did they really see and hear that?

It turns out that we are not the first people to ask that question. The second letter of Peter, written decades after the hike in the mountains on the Lebanese border, responds to an unknown skeptic, and says, “This is not a cleverly disguised myth...we were eyewitnesses of his majesty...we ourselves heard the voice from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain.” In other words, “that experience was true, and it changed our lives.” The author uses the word *mythos*, as, in the Greek world of that time, this was a particular kind of religious storytelling. One writer defines *mythos* as “a likely story arising from the life experience of any group, through which they come to experience their past, present and potential.” A likely story. We are still not satisfied. What did they see in Jesus that day?

In some ways, what they saw and heard was an echo of an earlier epiphany, the revelation at Jesus' baptism. There too, a voice from heaven was heard, saying, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In some ways, what they saw and heard was an echo of an even older manifestation, the clouds and the glory on Mount Sinai, when Moses received a covenant from God. What they saw and heard was a way to frame and understand their "past, present and potential." Was it the echoes of old stories? Was it a lack of oxygen? Was it sunlight on snow? Was it a waking dream? It may have been all or none of these things.

This scene has sometimes been called a "displaced resurrection story": an experience that really belongs at the end of the Gospel but has been shifted to help us understand the continuing presence of the divine in Jesus' earthly life. You can see why people would say this – the dazzling brightness, the command not to be afraid, the command to "rise up." It is a parallel to both the baptism and resurrection, except that it is not Jesus who is raised, from water or from the grave, but the disciples. They are pulled out of confusion and fear into new life and understanding. This does not happen just once in the Gospel story. There are a series of epiphanies, a growing understanding, a zig-zag path, sometimes steep and breathtaking, that gives a disciple moments of vision, when their past, present and potential is made into a meaningful whole.

A likely story arising from life experience. Perhaps we all have myths from our past: experiences which are true for us, unexplainable moments of brightness. There seems to be a tendency in humans to react to these myths in one of two ways. One is to enshrine them, to institutionalize them, as Peter wished to do by building 3 tabernacles for the 3 holy, shining men. The building of an institution makes an ineffable experience substantial, and gives it the weight of authority. It becomes frozen in time, an unmoving marker that says, "Once, something important happened here."

Another reaction to these mythic experiences is to bury them. They seem so strange and unbelievable. Maybe they didn't happen at all. Maybe it was the thin air on the mountain. We don't want to seem gullible or crazy. There's a rational explanation – so let's forget that a voice came from heaven and go about our daily business.

The question is, is there a third way? What happened to the disciples as they lost altitude, came down the mountain, and kept walking? What did they see and hear then? How did they respond to the mountaintop experience?

They kept listening and kept following. Jesus continued the dark conversation about his journey to Jerusalem and death. They kept listening, even though his clothes no longer shone, even though he no longer had Moses and Elijah as his companions. They kept following as Jesus healed a boy afflicted by seizures. They kept following as he engaged in debates about paying taxes. They watched and listened while he took a little child into their circle and said, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." His clothes no longer shone, and there was no voice from heaven. But the mountaintop experience suffused all these actions with grace and power. A seed had been planted...the myth had been seen...they had had one more epiphany. It would not be the last one.

Perhaps you have had an experience on a metaphorical or real mountain. Perhaps you have caught a glimpse of a larger whole, a greater power, a stronger light. Or perhaps it is just the reflection of another person's myth that has meaning for you. What happens to you when you lose

altitude, come down the mountain, and keep walking? What do you hear and see, once the brightness is gone?

I hope that you can see the glory in the ordinary. On the dusty road, people are healed. In the squalid town, conversations on economic justice take place. In grown-up conversations, children are valued and honored. It happens every day: epiphanies of grace and kindness, echoes of a divine covenant, transfigured relationships.

A climb to the summit of a mountain may be an end in itself: an accomplishment, “mind over matter.” It can also be a way to get a big view, a new perspective. A mystical experience has some value in itself, but its greater purpose is to get our attention, to help us notice – to identify those tiny transfigurations. Notice them. Reflect on them. Treasure them. Then one small experience can enrich another. And in the new math of the Spirit, the multiplication of grace is utterly amazing.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century a French bishop, Irenaeus, wrote, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” May that myth of glory come true for you, and for us all. Amen.