

Last week, the gospel had Jesus on a mountain. However, that was the sermon on the Mount, which is much earlier in Matthew's gospel. Today Jesus is on another mountain at his transfiguration. Different mountain, different lesson, for a few reasons.¹ In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is the "new Moses" fulfilling the new covenant. Therefore, it is appropriate that we hear the story in Exodus of Moses and Joshua on the mountain together.

In some ways these stories combine to create a common message for us as Christians: together, as a community we will experience mountain top moments. On the flip side, we will have to come down from the mountain too. There will be obstacles and challenges along the way.

Matthew is writing this Gospel to a group in need of hope. The community is in a bitter conflict with the synagogue over the identity of Jesus. There is controversy over which ritual practices to keep and let go of. There is political conflict as the Roman Empire is violently oppressing the Jewish people. Conflict is everywhere. A message of hope is desperately needed.²

The lectionary, the assigned scripture readings for Sunday worship do not follow a linear pattern.

Before today's reading, Jesus addressed the Pharisees on several points of morality. Matthew reminds the community that Jesus came to fulfill the law and help us see God's love with a radiant light. "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!'"³ God is speaking to how Christ is with us even if we are afraid. As the words from heaven say, we must listen to Jesus.

When we see Jesus on top of the mountain, it is directly followed by acts of mission. Jesus goes on to heal a boy with Epilepsy, teach (and predict) the coming passion and resurrection, then answer questions about the temple tax.⁴ Jesus does not stop to reflect upon what is happening on the mountain. Jesus has work to do leading to the cross and resurrection. Yet Jesus knows that the disciples need the spiritual nourishment that a mountain top experience provides. Jesus knows the divisions and the conflict that lay ahead.

When someone has something important to share, they share the matter with trusted companions. This happens in our reading from Exodus when: Moses brings Joshua with him, and in Matthew when Jesus brings Peter, James, John. Our companions are important. The three disciples will need each other now and will need each other in the future. The same way that we all need each other.

They help us connect with God and even ourselves. It is not that Jesus was necessarily favoring these disciples,⁵ rather that only a few leaders can experience the transfiguration.

In the same way, Moses recognized Joshua to be the right companion. Unlike the disciples, Joshua was an honored companion.⁶ He would go on to lead the Israelites into the

¹ The Bible Project. <https://youtu.be/GGCF3OPWN14>

² Punket-Brewton (2023). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord/commentary-on-exodus-2412-18-6>

³ Matthew 17:5

⁴ Hendriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

⁵ Hendriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

⁶ Wesley, J. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.ii.iii.xxv.ii.html>

promised land. This experience with Moses on the mountain top would inspire and sustain him for the coming battles.

God gives us experiences in our struggles so that we can endure. God provides a community where we can talk about the past transformative experiences with more authenticity. This can be hard to do in difficult times, such as the desert was in the temptation. With Lent merely a few days away; it is helpful to remember mountain top experiences before we go down from the mountain into the valley.

The community of Moses as well as the disciples of Jesus knew that there was more ahead of them as they tried to find a way out of the bondage of sin and the wilderness.

Both communities were hoping God would fulfill the promises they relied upon.⁷ Both communities would realize this expectation and it would come in time.

We are also searching for God: we are about to begin a season of searching our hearts and confessing our sins known as Lent. This season includes devotionals, prayers, the stations of the cross, and a more somber tone in worship, among other changes. This is a time of penitence and it will last forty days, not including Sunday. Sometimes, Lent feels as though it will never end. In the same way that our struggles seem like they will never end. During Lent, we are coming down from our Mountaintop experiences and listening. We act in missions through the Altar Guild, serving at Hope Center, and NAAM.

When we descend from the mountain, we see God in a new light: full of love and light. The reason that Jesus is illuminated is not necessarily because he is divine: if that were the case, Moses and Elijah would not have been illuminated as well.⁸ On that mountain, the disciples saw a piece of the shining light that would occur after the last resurrection. This glimpse of the future would give them hope for their ministry.

The ministry they were doing and would do: preaching, teaching and healing would lead to the future where everyone shines as they prophets and our Messiah did on that mountain top. The future is bright; however, we have work to do ahead of us: we must continue with the trials and tribulations of this life.

When we come to church on Shrove Tuesday for pancakes let us hold onto the rays of light in our hearts. The traditional reasoning for the celebration with pancakes is for us to use “the last” of our flour. While doing so, someone will end up with Jesus in their king cake. The next day is Ash Wednesday, which begins the season of Lent. The Prayer Book invites us to, “Examine our lives and conduct by the rule of God's commandments, that you may perceive wherein you have offended in what you have done or left undone, whether in thought, word, or deed.”⁹

This is not meant to shame us. Instead, the goal is to better reflect the light of Christ. Today, let us get the last of those Alleluias out of our system.

Let us remember that Christ is our eternal King and was glorified on a mountaintop. Let us laugh and enjoy the mountain a little longer. Then, starting Wednesday, let us prepare for the 40-day journey walking with Christ, into the valley. Let us remember that our Christian community can help sustain us through the valley ahead. Amen.

⁷ Punctet-Brewton (2023). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord/commentary-on-exodus-2412-18-6>

⁸ Wright, N.T. (2001). *Matthew for Everyone*. London: SPCK.

⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979). New York: Church Publishing

