

“Don’t Fence Me In”  
February 18, 2007

Exodus 34:29-35  
Luke 9:28-36

What is it about human beings and mountains and God? What is it about mountains and encountering the sacred that makes the phrase “mountain top experience” nearly synonymous with divine revelation or religious ecstasy?

I’m not asking these questions rhetorically. I’m inviting you to share your thoughts. What is it about mountain tops that the experience, and even just the idea, of being there so often prompts people to talk about encountering God and being filled with a sense of the holy?

Here are some of the possibilities that struck me. For those of us who have a sense of God as someone or something that dwells in the heavens, being on the mountain top brings us closer to God in a very concrete sense. Another possibility is that being at the height of a mountain peak gives us a different, much more far-reaching perspective that might mirror at least a bit of God’s much wider perspective on human life and on all creation. If the mountain is high enough that the top is in the clouds, we can stand on the earth while also being in the clouds, so that we experience the coming together of earth and sky. And, perhaps, in *that* coming together, we also experience the coming together of mortal, human life and the eternal life of God.

I think mountain top experiences of the sacred are even more related to what it takes to reach the top: the steady effort to reach the peak of a mountain by foot. The persistent, slow process of putting one foot in front of the other and the discipline required to keep going even when you can’t see your destination have strong parallels in the life of faith. Our growth in the spirit can often seem slow and plodding, and our destination is usually outside our range of vision. And yet, like the mountain climber, those who seek to live in the Spirit and to grow in faith keep up the steady pace, engaging in the discipline of putting one foot in front of the other in prayer, in meditation, and, for those of us whose spiritual home is Christianity, in reading and studying Scripture. So there’s a way in which reaching the mountain top after a slow, steady climb can indeed provide a glimpse of the holy, just as the slow, steady life of faith provides glimpses of that same holy spirit.

This morning’s readings from Exodus and from Luke arise from this widely shared human sense that the mountain is where one can encounter and be transformed by the holy, but, as sacred stories, they have also *nurtured* that understanding of God’s accessibility on the mountain. In the reading from Exodus, Moses, the pivotal figure in the Torah, in Jewish scripture, follows God’s command to climb Mount Sinai, so that the two of them can converse. After their conversations, when Moses descends the mountain, not only is he holding the two tablets of the covenant; he’s also radiating the glory of God.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus ascends the mountain to pray and takes with him three disciples, James, John, and Peter. As he prays, Jesus, too, begins to radiate the glory of God in his face and even through his clothing, and the disciples then see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.

So this morning, we have two primary, archetypal stories of mountain top experiences. Moses and Jesus (and James, John, and Peter) climb a mountain, and they and the world are never the same.

Notice, though, how Peter reacts in the story from the Gospel of Luke. Instead of sitting in awe and wonder, instead of being willing to be still and simply receive the grace and the mystery of that vision on the mountain, Peter has to *do* something. Peter has to try to fix or freeze the moment, by proposing to make dwellings for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. And as soon as he tries to pin down this moment of mystery, as soon as he tries, literally, to domesticate this sacred vision, a cloud comes upon the mountain, a voice speaks, and Elijah and Moses are gone.

In this sacred story, Peter seems to have fallen for the illusion that God is somehow *containable*. Peter flirts with the idea that he can control God's action or presence by making dwellings for these holy men. Peter is tempted and, ultimately, seduced by the desire to define and confine God in human terms, the desire to put God in a tent or behind a fence, the desire to make God conform to Peter's expectations.

In other words, Peter is being thoroughly human, and he is very much our brother in his faithfulness *and in his unfaithfulness*. Across time and across the globe, we human folk are still trying to define and confine God; we're still trying to pin God down to justify our own actions and our own prejudices.

Here, in this congregation, we have a particular inclination to point out and expose what we see as *other people's* attempts to domesticate God and to use that false "God" for their own purposes. At FCC, we have an especially strong tendency to accuse someone else of trying to fence God in if we think of that someone else as "a fundamentalist," "a conservative Christian," or "an evangelical." This is tricky territory, my friends, very tricky territory. The Gospels contain Jesus' warnings not to judge, so that we will not be judged, and also not to concentrate on removing the small speck from our brother's or sister's eye while ignoring the large log in our own. But at the same time, we have also received Jesus' instruction not to hide our light under a basket and Paul's instruction to speak the truth in love.

So when we see brothers or sisters holding tightly to a Biblical interpretation that limits God's love and welcome, we *are* called to witness to a God whose love crosses all human boundaries and divisions. When someone else fences God in and uses that falsely limited God to condemn others, we are called to act. When we see brothers and sisters standing in public places with signs that say, "G-A-Y, God Abhors You," some of us are called to stand and speak in public places and quote John Robinson, who blessed the voyage of the first Pilgrims sailing for America with these words, "God hath yet *more* light and *more* truth to break forth" from the Bible. In the face of efforts to use a fenced-in version of God to hurt and exclude *any* of God's people, we are called to celebrate and honor the beauty and blessedness of *all* of God's people.

We're also in very tricky but unavoidable territory when rigidity or an illusion of certainty overtakes our brothers and sisters and they proclaim that Christianity is the one and only true religion. In that territory, some of us are called to testify about both the richness and truth we find in the Christian tradition *and* the openness to other paths of faith that we find in our tradition and in our own Christian journeys.

But my beloved sisters and brothers, you and I know that it's not simply those *other* people who are vulnerable to the siren call of self-righteous certainty. It's not only

those other people who surrender to the temptation to try to confine God and then use that version of God for their own purposes. Those of us who like to think of ourselves as progressive thinkers, those of us who consider ourselves progressive Christians, are no less vulnerable to that temptation.

Instead of focusing on sexuality or the supposed superiority of the Christian faith, though, we progressive folk often focus on social and political issues. We can take the issue that is the most compelling *to us*, accurately and appropriately cast it as a matter of faith and spiritual calling, and then condemn anyone who doesn't join us in believing that that one issue is the most pressing issue in a life of faith. We can fall into the trap of believing that the way in which the Spirit dwells in *us* and moves *us* to build the commonwealth of God is the way that the Spirit dwells and moves in everyone else. We can be just like Peter on that mountain top with Jesus, James, and John, thinking that we can determine where and how the Spirit will dwell, instead of realizing that Spirit chooses where and how it dwells within everyone and within the cosmos.

We progressive folk can also hold on so tightly to our own frequently more intellectual understanding of faith and spirituality that we dismiss or even ridicule our sisters and brothers whose experiences of God and the sacred are much more emotional, even ecstatic. At divinity school, at gatherings of the Northern California Nevada Conference, at lectures sponsored by the Pacific School of Religion, and, yes, at gatherings and meetings here at FCC, I've encountered condescension and snide remarks about people whose faith experience is far more emotive than intellectual, far more ecstatic than rational.

And just last week, I found myself slipping into that inflexible sense of superiority, that certainty that I know where and how God truly dwells, when I was with a group of evangelical Christians who talked about their relationship with God and Jesus in language and with emotion that take me outside my comfort zone. At that meeting, I wanted to imitate Peter on the mountain top and try to fix and define the ways in which God should dwell in those people, to fix and define how those people should express that in-dwelling of God's Spirit. Instead, through God's grace, I was able to sit and listen and be uncomfortable.

Progressive or conservative, charismatic or intellectual, exuberantly Pentecostal or coolly rational, we are all vulnerable to acting like Peter on the mountain top. We are all tempted to take our encounters with the holy, our sense of God, and try to pin them down. We can all be seduced into believing that we can fix the dwelling place of God, not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

Just as Jesus called Peter, James, and John to join him on the mountain so that they could encounter the glory and mystery of God, God calls us into our own transformative encounters with the holy. These experiences can be literal mountain top experiences, but they can also come in the quiet moments of holding a child, of feeling a long-held hardness in our hearts melt into compassion and forgiveness, or of seeing indescribable beauty in the eyes of friend, a stranger, or any other one of God's creations. We're invited into these experiences, not so that we can hold on to them, as Peter tried to do, but so that the experiences can transform us into people who radiate the glory and love of God.

Follow God's call into those experiences. Accept them for the mysterious gifts that they are. Don't try to contain those experiences, but, instead, let them change you into beacons of holy hope and love.

If we follow God's call, we may not radiate so brightly that we have to cover our faces as Moses did, and we may not radiate so brightly that our clothes, like Jesus' clothes, become dazzling white, but with God's blessing and grace, we can come mighty close.

For that and for so much more, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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