

Welcome

What is your most memorable mountain-top experience? One of my most significant was in the Holy Land on an actual mountain - the Mount of Olives. My friend Thomas and I were retracing Jesus' steps, and we came over the mountain to look down at the city of Jerusalem - it was a scene Jesus experienced several times in the course of his ministry and for me it was one of those moments that the veil between heaven and earth felt a little thinner than usual. I felt God near to me in a way that was unusual, special.

That's what a mountain top experience is - for many of us, those moments have happened in a church building, in a time of worship. Maybe it was an altar call or during a particular song. Maybe it was some kind of event - a rally or retreat. For others of us, that veil gets thin when we're in nature, when we're unplugged from the chaos of the world around us and suddenly, on the trail, at the edge of the ocean, on a literal mountain top.

For those of us seeking God, we often look in those special places - here at Church, or maybe in nature. In times of crisis, we flock to these mountain tops, hoping to encounter God, hoping the veil will be thinner and we'll encounter that source of life, hope and love we crave.

So today, we're going to talk about mountain tops. And what we'll see is that while you can find God in the mountain tops, that's not only where God is - in fact, that's not even mainly where God is. The story of God, the story we'll experience today, is that of a God who doesn't live on mountain tops, but on the ground, with us in our everyday world. So as we begin to worship together this morning, let's stand and sing about a God who is with us, a God who is near even in the darkest places in our world. As we sing, reflect on the places you expect to find God - and the places you don't. Where might God be that you don't expect?

Message

[**God on the Mountain**] Looking for God on mountain tops is one of the oldest human impulses. In our earliest days, when we thought the sky was a dome, mountains were the pillars of the earth, holding up the heavens. The Babylonians wanted to build a tower to Heaven. The Greek gods lived on Olympus. And the Canaanites worshiped at their high places. Mountain tops were the bridge between heaven and earth, the place where the veil was thinner and humans and gods could interact.

But while the Bible does have some mountaintop encounters with God, the good news of Scripture is that God doesn't stay on the mountain, distant and removed from us. Rather, God comes down from the mountain to live with us on the ground.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany. For the last two months, we have been asking, Who is God? We've seen again and again that God is not distant and removed. Rather, God is near, God is with us. We've heard God's call as the creator of the universe who created us in his image, to do his work in the world. And we've seen that God is with us not just when we're faithful, in good times, but in the hard times too. God is with us even when we are unfaithful.

We called this series the Prophets and Poets Mixtape because we've been reading both the prophet and the psalm, treating the song like a soundtrack for the prophet. The picture of God that has emerged from that intersection has challenged and encouraged us.

[God among us on the ground] Today, this final Sunday of Epiphany, is Transfiguration Sunday, so I want to do something a little different. Instead of reading the Psalm today, I want to read two stories of God on top of a Mountain - one in Exodus, and then the story of the Transfiguration. As we've done throughout the series, we'll pay attention to the intersection of these stories. In particular today, the stories parallel each other in a way that is powerful good news. These texts today reveal God's ultimate plan, which is not living distant and removed from us, but rather, living with us, among us, right here, on the ground, in our everyday lives.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Exodus 24. God has freed Israel from slavery to Egypt and brought them to a mountain. God is on top of the mountain (because that's where they expect God to be), and God has spoken to the people, invited them into covenant. The people agreed, so God gave them the 10 commandments, which are like the basic terms of the covenant. Now, God is about to call Moses up to get the fine print, the rest of the instructions for what it looks like to be God's people.

You'll notice as we read that Moses goes up alone. That's because God's presence is dangerous for ordinary people. We use the word 'holy' to describe God's presence, but I find it helpful to think of God's holiness sort of like radiation. God is so holy, that when sinful people come in contact with that holiness, it can kill us. That's why God stays on top of the mountain... for now. And it's why only a very few people - prophets like Moses and the priests, can approach God.

Let's read what happens when Moses goes up the mountain:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain. Stay there, and I will give you the tablets of stone on which I have inscribed the instructions and commands so you can teach the people." So Moses and his assistant Joshua set out, and Moses climbed up the mountain of God.

Moses told the elders, "Stay here and wait for us until we come back. Aaron and Hur are here with you. If anyone has a dispute while I am gone, consult with them."

Then Moses climbed up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. And the glory of the Lord settled down on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared at the summit like a consuming fire. Then Moses disappeared into the cloud as he climbed higher up the mountain. He remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.
-- Exodus 24:12-18

Can you imagine being among Israel, watching the top of the mountain burn with God's holy fire? Were they afraid? Were they in awe? We know many of them were pretty sure Moses was dead (he didn't come back for 40 days!). If this were the end of the story, it would be basically exactly like all the cultures around them. This is why you don't build towers to heaven. This is why you don't climb Olympus. Because God is holy and it's too dangerous for ordinary people!

[God on Mt, Tabernacle at bottom, Arrow to tabernacle] But this isn't the end of the Exodus story. Moses does eventually return. And part of the instruction he got were plans to build a tabernacle - think of it sort of like a bubble for God. The Tabernacle was a tent that was kept holy by Moses and Israel's priests. And in the center of the tent was a chamber called the Holiest Place, or the Holy of Holies. At the end of Exodus, Israel finishes building the Tabernacle.

And then, God comes down off the mountain, and lives with the people, on the ground. The whole point of Exodus wasn't just to free the people from slavery. And it wasn't just to give them the covenant. It certainly wasn't to deliver a list of rules. No, the whole point of the Exodus was this moment: God leaves the mountain to live with God's people.

[Scripture Slide 2 -- change "memorials" to "tabernacles" per my example below] Keep that idea in your mind - the tabernacle was God's way of leaving the mountain to live with us. Turn with me to Matthew 17. This is the story of the Transfiguration, the story today celebrates in the Church Calendar. This is during Jesus' ministry as he heads toward Jerusalem. Jesus' story began at Christmas, when God came into the world, and Epiphany ends here, when we see exactly who Jesus is, his glory fully on display. As we read, you'll hear some echoes of Moses on the Mountain:

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

Peter exclaimed, "Lord, it's wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I'll make three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him." The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.

Then Jesus came over and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." And when they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus.

As they went back down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." -- Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus and his disciples climb a mountain and Jesus is transformed - he glows with the glory of God. And two of Israel's greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah, appear with him. Peter treats this as a revelation comparable to what happened at Mt. Sinai with Moses. We know because of how he responds: He says, "This is great! Let me build three *tabernacles*." Because Peter knows how the story goes: God comes to the mountain, and God lives in the tabernacle.

Which is why what happens next is so important: Jesus says, "Get up. We have to go back down the mountain." Because that's who God is. God is the one who leaves the mountain to live with us on the ground.

In both stories, there is pain ahead. Israel doesn't know it, but they're going to be spending 40 years living as nomads in the desert. And the disciples don't realize it, but Jesus is heading for Jerusalem, for his death.

[God leaves mountain for Cross] This is why the Transfiguration matters: not because of the mountain top experience where God is revealed in glory. Big deal. Every religion has that - a God of power who is revealed in mountaintops and miracles. No, what matters for us is not the mountaintop, but what comes next.

God leaves the mountain to live with us. Among us. God goes with us into the very darkest places - into the wilderness, into even the darkness of suffering and death.

This is the good news of the Transfiguration, the good news of Epiphany, the good news of the whole story of Scripture: God is not the God of mountaintops. God is the god of the trenches. The God of the ground level, of real life. God is the God of the wilderness and the Cross.

Christmas promised that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Epiphany shows us that God is with us *everywhere*, that nowhere we go is outside of God's reach. And I have to tell you friends, I am so thankful I don't have to wait for mountaintops to encounter God. I'm glad I don't have to fly to the Holy Land. And I love our Sundays worshipping together, but I'm so thankful God doesn't limit me to once a week to experience the power of the Spirit. I'm thankful I hear God's voice when I'm reading Scripture or in prayer during the week. I'm thankful to feel God's embrace in your hugs and handshakes after we've shared a meal or during a c-group meeting. I'm thankful God speaks through my wife and my friends and in the silence when I'm alone.

I'm thankful that God has come down off the mountain because I need God more than one morning a week. I need God every day. I need a God who isn't distant and removed. I need a God who cares about me from moment to moment. I need a God who doesn't judge me and count my failures against me, but rather leaves the mountain to embrace me in my failure and show me the way to life.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] I need the God of this Communion table...

Commented [1]: +36monsters@gmail.com My vision of this is a graphic with the mountain on one side and a looooooong downward slope that ends at the cross. An arrow that shows ---> movement (down and toward the cross).

Tell me if that doesn't make sense and I'll sketch it out.
Assigned to Tye Lombardi

1. When in the last week did I experience God's presence?
2. When in the last week was I not looking for God?
3. Where in the next week am I not expecting God to be?
4. How can I look for God in those places this week?

Blessing + Examen Assignment

[Lent Graphic] Since this is the last day of Epiphany, we are preparing to observe Lent. Lent is the season that gets us ready for Easter. It's a time we journey with Jesus to the Cross by facing our Sin head on. This year, our Lent series will be called Lent is for Losers. We're going to see how we have failed repeatedly to be the people of God. We're going to be honest about our failings, our shortcomings, our refusals to live up to God's calling.

Throughout this series, we've been exploring tensions: the tension between religion and the rest of our lives. The tension between joy and sorrow. The tension between personal holiness and social justice. The tension between grace and law. And what we've seen again and again is that God doesn't resolve these tensions. Rather, God comes down from the mountain to live in the tension with us.

During Lent, we'll keep this before us: God is with us. God is faithful, even in our failings. God is not the God who sits distant on the mountaintop judging us. God comes down off the mountain, to live in our Sin with us, and ultimate, God gives himself over to that Sin for us. God takes our sin on himself. On the Cross, God becomes the ultimate loser - and somehow in his death we find life.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, so I hope you'll join us at 7 on Wednesday as we begin our Lenten journey. In the meantime, I'd like to offer you a challenge. For centuries, Christians have used Prayers of Examen like the one we just did to be more aware of where God is in the everyday world. As you leave this mountaintop where we've gathered this week, would you commit with me to begin each day with a Prayer of Examen? Each day, shortly after you wake up, prayerfully answer the question, "Where did I see God yesterday?" And then think about the day ahead of you and ask, "Where will I be surprised to see God today?" God, help me see you today."

Where do you need God to be this week? In the midst of a broken or strained relationship? God is there. In a painful illness? God is there. Maybe you're struggling to discern what is next in your life. God is there. As you leave from this place, as you return to the world, may you go knowing that God is ahead of you, working to bring life, hope and healing.