

# Sermon: The Words on the Mountain

February 19, 2023

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

*by Eric Anderson*

Kathryn Schifferdecker writes at Working Preacher, “There are lots of mountains in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is tempted by Satan on one mountain (Matthew 4:8); he teaches from another, which is why we call that particular discourse ‘the Sermon on the Mount’ (Matthew 5:1). He heals and feeds the crowds on a mountain (Matthew 15:29), and of course, he talks with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, which is the story we hear this week (Matthew 17).”

The two figures who appeared and joined Jesus on this mountaintop were also associated with significant events on mountains. We just read about Moses ascending the mountain of God (known both as Mount Sinai and Mount Horeb) to receive the tablets of the Law. A little over 850 years before Jesus’ birth, the prophet Elijah had engaged in a victorious contest with the prophets of the Canaanite deity Baal, successfully calling fire from heaven to light a sacrifice to the Hebrew God – at the top of Mount Carmel, another mountain.

When we talk about faith and spirituality, we tend to speak of “mountaintop experiences,” times when God seems especially close or compelling or clear. We may make major life choices out of these experiences. It won’t come as much of a surprise I look back at my call to ministry as a mountaintop experience. That experience led to a decision, and that decision has led me away from some things I had planned and brought me to a large number of things that I hadn’t planned at all. Mountaintop experiences prompt people to marriages and to divorces; to the selection of educational programs and vocations, to the establishment of homes and to joining communities.

I would be remiss if I didn’t point out, however, that people make these choices all the time without a mountaintop experience. They’re not required. As we might note from Simon Peter’s somewhat dazed offer to build shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, mountaintop experiences can bring as much confusion as clarity. Nor are they required to make statements of great insight and deep faith. The first words of our reading today were “Six days later.” Six days later than what?

Six days later than the day Jesus asked his closest friends who they said he was, and Simon Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

This mountaintop experience didn't tell Peter anything he didn't already know, nothing he hadn't already said. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Confirmation of his faithful witness was more frightening than affirming.

I'll also note that it didn't prevent Peter from denying Jesus three times on the night before Jesus' crucifixion.

Let's take a closer look at this mountaintop experience with Peter, James, John, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It deliberately echoed Exodus 24, didn't it? There was a cloud, there were bright lights, there was a voice. The words spoken by the voice, however, didn't echo Exodus 24. They echoed Matthew 3. These are the words (plus three words) that Jesus heard at his baptism, which was definitely not on a mountain. In fact, the place identified as the site of his baptism is 1260' *below* sea level.

The mountaintop experience was the echo of a riverbank experience.

How come we never talk about riverbank experiences?

Jesus summoned James, John, Simon Peter, and Andrew, you might recall, not on a mountain but by the shores of the Sea of Galilee, probably near Capernaum. Again, so much not a mountain that it is, once more, 682' below sea level.

Shall we discuss seaside experiences?

Our own encounters with God may happen from mauka to makai and back again, on the slopes of a cinder cone or a black sand beach, by the ripples of a watercourse or in the midst of the dry grasslands, in the shadow of ohī'a trees or surrounded by coffee cherries. God is the God of the world, not just the mountains or the seas. God will come to us where and when God wills.

These big close, compelling, and clear experiences are not, however, the be-all and end-all of Christian life and faith. Debie Thomas writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](http://JourneyWithJesus.net), “One of the many problems with my ‘God on the mountaintop’ version of Christianity is that it prompts me to carve up and compartmentalize my life. To separate ‘sacred’ from ‘secular.’ The mountain from the valley. The spectacular from the mundane. As if God is somehow more present during a rousing worship set, a stirring sermon, or a silent retreat in a seaside monastery, than God is when I'm doing the laundry, returning a library book, or driving my son to his friend's house. The work of discernment is harder and messier in everyday life, yes. I have to look for God minus blinding lights and roaring thunder. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. The God of the whisper is still God.”

Elijah – that third figure there with Jesus and Moses – knew that painfully well. After his triumph on Mount Carmel, he fled from the wrath of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to Mount Horeb – that’s the same mountain of God, Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law. Elijah saw and heard a great wind, a fire, and an earthquake, but God wasn’t in any of them. God spoke to Elijah in a “still small voice,” or perhaps the translation should be a “sound of sheer silence.”

The God of the whisper is still God.

God is still speaking, in shouts and whispers and at every volume in between.

So let’s remember those three words God spoke on the mountain that weren’t heard by the riverbank: “Listen to him.”

D. Mark Davis writes at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), “The imperative ‘Listen’ is important. While it could be translated ‘pay attention,’ the primary meaning of ‘hearing’ in the word ἀκούω seems to indicate that of all of the phenomena attached to this moment – transformation, Moses and Elijah, brightness, etc. – the significant thing is that one listens to Jesus.”

It’s not about the mountain, or the light. It’s not about the great figures, or the echoes of the Exodus. It’s about the *words* on the mountain, the *words* on the riverbank, the *words* on the seashore.

Listen to Jesus.

If listening to Jesus and taking him seriously makes you uneasy, I don’t blame you. Hearing those words caused Peter, James, and John to fall to the ground, overcome by fear. I grant you that that may have had more to do with the big voice from the cloud than the words themselves, but if Christians have shown a talent for one thing over the last two millennia, it’s for ignoring, reshaping, or mischaracterizing the words of Jesus. I count myself among those talented Christians.

As Rachel Hackenberg writes at [rachelhackenberg.com](#):

“Do not reveal Yourself transformed  
for I am not ready to be  
transfigured.”

Think about last week’s words of Jesus concerning anger. How many of us prefer to feed our anger or lash out with it rather than restrain it? What about Jesus’ warning about storing up treasures for ourselves? Don’t we spend a fair amount of effort to make sure we have

“enough,” but “enough” keeps growing? Have we taken Jesus’ advice to avoid worrying about tomorrow? Doesn’t that worry occupy far more of our day than we’d like to admit?

Oh, and judging others. Jesus said not to. And if I’m honest, well. Yeah.

“In everything do to others as you would have them to do you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Do we?

That’s just a few of Jesus’ teachings chosen from the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew took those words, “Listen to him,” really seriously. He took the time at the beginning of the book to tell briefly of Jesus’ birth, of his ancestry, of his baptism, and of the call of his first disciples – then plunged into that lengthy collection of Jesus’ teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Ha. There’s a mountain again.

But the crucial words on the mountain remain, “Listen to him.”

Listen hard, listen deep. Listen with as few preconceptions as you can – or you might find yourself offering somewhat pointless suggestions like, “How about we build some shelters for you and Moses and Elijah, Jesus?” Listen attentively and listen wholeheartedly. Listen on the mountain and on the slopes and by the watercourses and in the grasslands and in the forests and by the sea.

Listen to Jesus.

Amen.