

The Mountain

February 15, 2026

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

In his documentary on the Darkness of the Renaissance, British art critic Waldemar Januszczak said, "Mountains have a powerful effect on people. Mountains cloud your judgment. They heighten your emotions and intoxicate you." He's right. The vistas from mountains – and the views of mountains – go right to the feelings. You find your breath catching, and not just because of the altitude.

We live at the foot of two of the earth's great summits. I grant you that I've lived here not quite ten years, and most of you have lived here much longer than that, but I put it to you: have you ever looked up at Mauna Kea on a clear day and not felt something? Can Mauna Kea ever make you feel... nothing?

They make me feel something. They catch me, heart and soul, every time.

But do they cloud our judgment? I'm less sure about that. I do know that a mountain makes me see things in a different way. That can be quite literal, when I'm at the mountain summit and seeing the world as I can't see it from the mountain's foot. It's also emotional. There I am, feeling at the top of the world, and not just from lack of oxygen.

I can feel at one and the same time both the greatest of all living beings and one of the small creatures I can't even see far down the slopes.

Mountaintops are powerful. That's true. They bring us away from the day-to-day of human living. They show us grandeur that's beyond us. At the same time they place this grandeur in the palms of our hands.

I suspect that Simon Peter, James, and John anticipated something like that when they climbed the mountain with Jesus. They looked to see the glory of Creation stretching out below them. They expected to gasp air in deep breaths after the exertion of the climb. They probably hoped to hear something new from Jesus, whom they'd just acclaimed as Messiah (and been scolded for misunderstanding what Jesus meant by Messiah) six days before. Top of the world.

They got more than they'd bargained for. Jesus glowed like the sun. The two greatest religious leaders of ancient Israel stood there with Jesus: Moses who'd freed the people from Egypt and delivered God's Law, and Elijah who'd maintained the faith against hostile monarchs and been

carried away to God without dying. The Messiah, people whispered, would be a prophet like Moses. The Messiah, people whispered, would be heralded by Elijah returned.

“It is interesting,” writes D. Mark Davis at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), “that neither the transformation of Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, nor the bright light evoked fear in the disciples. Hearing the voice out of the clouds is what did them in.”

We don't usually collapse at the top of a mountain – well, except to catch our breath from the climb. In fact, I usually find that the sight energizes me, lifts me up. I move about from place to place to take in the view in all directions. Mountaintops inspire. They rarely overwhelm.

Booming voices from clouds overwhelm. I'd have been overwhelmed. Without doubt. But as Rev. Davis says, all the strange and overwhelming things before that didn't overcome them. Unusual? Yes. Unexpected? I wouldn't have expected it. Frightful? No. I think there's even a hint that, like the simple view from a mountaintop, the disciples found the experience inspiring as well as awe-inspiring. If I understand Peter's offer to make shelters correctly, they were prepared to extend the inspiring experience, to learn more, to plan more, to prepare themselves for the work they'd undertake when they returned to the mountain's foot.

Unsurprisingly, significant religious experiences in people's lives tend to be called “mountaintop experiences.” Those experiences don't have to happen on mountains. Plenty of them don't. But like experiences on mountains, including most of the Transfiguration, they tend to inspire, not overwhelm.

Listen to that again. Most of the time, when God reaches out to someone, God doesn't overwhelm them. God inspires them.

Mountaintop experiences aren't necessarily visions of glory accompanied by angelic music and words of thunder. Mountaintop experiences are the ones that make a difference to your soul.

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Debie Thomas writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](#), “...as long as I can remember, I've measured the depth and 'success' of my faith by the number of mountaintop experiences I can truthfully claim. Have I 'felt the Spirit' in Sunday morning worship? Has Jesus 'spoken' to me? Have I seen visions? Spoken in tongues? Encountered God's living presence in my dreams?

“Most of the time, the answer is 'no.' Which means I've spent most of my life feeling like a spiritual failure.”

Without commenting on the rightness or wrongness of the feeling – feelings, as I've noted before, happen whether they reflect external reality or not – I've never found Ms. Thomas a spiritual failure. Given how often I quote her in sermons, I've found her to be a significant

spiritual guide. She's described here a fairly widespread notion that spiritual success equates to overwhelming spiritual experiences. And... it doesn't.

Spiritual success, I think, takes place when we pay attention to our experiences of God, whether they're grand or subtle, and let them change our path.

As Audrey West writes at Working Preacher, "Then and now, the full meaning of a mountaintop experience may not become clear until after the return to the valley, after the passage of time. After they come down from the mountain, the disciples listen, as the voice has instructed: they hear Jesus' parables, they hear his response to friends and foes, they hear his repeated references to the Son of Humanity."

"Listen to him," thundered the voice from the cloud. That overwhelmed Peter, James, and John, but it's also the central theme of Matthew's Gospel. Listen to Jesus. Each occasion of listening to Jesus is, to some degree, a mountaintop experience. It has the ability to transform us. It has the ability to redirect us. It has the ability to inspire us.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Are you inspired?

"Blessed are the peacemakers." Are you inspired?

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Are you inspired?

"Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Are you inspired?

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Are you inspired?

I know you've been inspired, somewhere, somehow, by something. Why? You're here. I have plenty of illusions about myself, but I'm pretty sure you can find things to do on Sunday morning that you'd enjoy more than dreading one of my puns coming along. But you're here. You made the time. You made the effort. Why?

You've been inspired. Maybe you're hoping for some more inspiration, but you've already been inspired.

It doesn't happen every day, as you know. As Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "This makes me think that perhaps the experience wasn't given to the disciples so that they could cling to it. Perhaps it was given to them so that they could practice letting go. On the difficult path ahead, they are going to have to let go of Jesus again and again. Here they are asked to let go of even a vision so profound that it was called 'transfiguration.'"

“Maybe living with the coming and going of clouds incapsulates this lesson daily. ‘And thus I saw him and I sought him,’ Julian of Norwich writes. ‘And I had him and I lacked him.’ This isn’t something to mourn, she counsels, but is instead ‘the common working of this life.’ We glimpse God, and then God goes behind a cloud. In this way, we learn to love rather than cling.”

I’d add that we learn to love rather than puppet. We learn to love of our own initiative rather than depending on ongoing inspiration. We’re inspired for a moment. We’re changed in a moment. We move forward from there... and continue to learn, grow, change, and love in each place we go, no matter how far from the mountain.

As Maren Tirabassi wrote this week in a comment on ordainedgeek.com, “And so life-changing experiences are not really life-changing, just moment-changing and that always must be enough.”

It must, and it is. Those moments for each of you brought you to this moment. This moment may not inspire you that much, and if it doesn’t I apologize, since that is sort of the point of this exercise, but these moments, these experiences, they lead to new moments, new experiences, and if not all of them have the power of mountaintop moments, they all have power, they all give direction, they all inspire.

In these continuing moments, we follow Jesus. In these continuing moments, we love.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson