

## **Sermon: What We Take from the Mountain**

Year A, Transfiguration Sunday

[Exodus 24:12-18](#); [Psalm 2](#); [2 Peter 1:16-21](#); [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

Offered February 23, 2020 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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For Matthew, Jesus of Nazareth was clearly, demonstrably, obviously the Messiah his people had been waiting for. It was so clear to him that in some places in his gospel, you can see how it pains him that portions of his community have doubts. There are also places where he goes out of his way to argue his understanding of Jesus as the Messiah by quoting portions of the Hebrew Bible where he wants to make it crystal clear that Jesus is fulfilling the literal words of the prophets.

But today's passage about going up on a mountain is not one of them. I think for Matthew it wasn't that the parallels weren't there, but because they were so blindingly obvious. And yet for those of us who are not so familiar with the Exodus story, we may not make the connection.

I had Megan read both the Exodus account of Moses on the mountain top and the Matthew account of Jesus on the mountain top so we could hear them together. Let's just tick off the similarities: mountain top, cloud, presence of God, devouring fire/shining like the sun/some kind of powerful light show. We, who have lived our whole lives believing that Jesus was the Messiah, can just nod our heads and say, "Got it. Lots of parallels there. This story builds on the Moses one. We're good to go." In our haste, we miss the point that Matthew is making.

This mountain peak moment is at the center of a lot of important themes coming together.

Up to this point in the book of Exodus, we have been talking about the Law, what it is, and how to obey it.<sup>1</sup> God gives Moses a set of tablets with the Ten Commandments already carved into them. God directly makes something physical in this world and hands it over.<sup>2</sup> The Ten Commandments are the rules of emancipation.<sup>3</sup> The Israelites have been slaves in Egypt and now they are free. Before the rules were whatever Pharaoh said, and they changed based on the economic and political needs of the Egyptian state. Now the rules don't change. They are the rules that are designed to let a people live together as their own nation,<sup>4</sup> loving a God who loves them back.

After this point in the book of Exodus, we will talk about the Tabernacle and how to worship God correctly.<sup>5</sup> In the rest of the ancient Middle East, worship rituals were spelled out so that the god they were addressed to would follow the rules. Do worship right and no earthquake, no drought, no losses in war. In Exodus, the worship rituals are for the worshippers, so they are reminded and humbled by the truth that the God of Israel is too powerful to be bound by anyone's rules and too loving to forget the people who follow God's ways.

This mountain top moment connects law and worship.

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<sup>1</sup> William Joseph Danaher, Jr., "Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration Sunday), Theological Perspective, Exodus 24:12-18" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 434.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Danaher, 434.

God calls Moses to the mountain top, requiring obedience.<sup>6</sup> God shows Moses and the people of Israel a devouring fire,<sup>7</sup> requiring their acknowledgement of an awe of God that frightens them.

Law and worship, obedience and awe.

The obedience is so complete, the awe is so overwhelming, that the Israelites ask for that to never happen again. Meeting God is too terrifying, too disabling. They ask God for a mediator. God readily agrees and Moses becomes that mediator.<sup>8</sup> That mediator isn't perfect, isn't without sin.<sup>9</sup> Moses takes the Ten Commandments and works with the leadership of his community to figure out how they apply to particular situations. Divine law requires imperfect human implementation in order to allow a community to flourish.<sup>10</sup>

Law and worship, obedience and awe, divine law and human implementation.

God speaks to Moses and through Moses, but the understanding of the community is that God speaks to the whole community as well. The Ten Commandments weren't just for Moses, and Joshua and Aaron and Hur are going to have another set. God speaks to the entire community through the Ten Commandments.<sup>11</sup> Some of those commandments spell out how they are supposed to treat each other as a community.

Law and worship, obedience and awe, divine law and human implementation, individual and communal experience of God.

This mountain top is at the center of so much that is vital to making the followers of God thrive. That's what Matthew is pointing at when he describes Jesus on his mountain top.

Matthew makes sure we see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets, the two major sections of the Jewish sacred texts which had been canonized by that point. There's a voice from the cloud, which repeats a phrase that we heard at Jesus' baptism. The disciples are completely overwhelmed, bow down, and Jesus comes over to reassure them. When they look up, everything is back to normal. No Moses, no Elijah, no cloud.

This may be where we, as Christians, make a fatal mistake. We read the story from Matthew and tell ourselves, "We don't need Moses and Elijah, we don't need the Law and the Prophets. We have Jesus." Do we really want to turn our back on law and worship, obedience and awe, divine law and human implementation, the individual and communal experience of God? "No of course not," we say. "But we can get it from Jesus." Can we? Look at him, in today's reading from Matthew. Talking freely and easily with Moses and Elijah.<sup>12</sup> The conversation may go on for hours, so they probably need someplace to really sit comfortably and chat, or at least that's what Peter thought, offering to build them shelters.

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<sup>6</sup> Danaher, 434.

<sup>7</sup> Danaher, 434.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Danaher, 438.

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Henry F. Knight, "The Transfigured Face of Post-Shoah Faith: Critical Encounters with Root Experiences - Ex 24:12-18 and Mt 17:1-9." *Encounter* 58, no. 2 (1997): 146.

If we turn away from our Jewish roots, aren't we turning away from people like Matthew and Jesus, who found the stories of the Hebrew Bible reveal so much about the awesome power and love of God? If we turn away from our Jewish roots, are we aware that we're making it easier for us to be shocked by the protestors in Charlottesville, not because they said "Jews will not replace us.", which was pretty awful. But the shocking thing for a lot of people was that they said it outloud? Antisemitism is on the rise, including shootings in synagogues.<sup>13</sup> As Christians, with our own institutional history of antisemitism, we need to be aware of where it can sneak in to our thinking. As we head into Lent later this week, we'll reflect on where we need to repent. And, as individual sinners, we all have a list. But as a community we also have a list. And turning away from the insights, nuances and history that our Jewish history offers us has to be on that list. This story today, the last one we'll hear before heading into Lent, is one where traditionally people have interpreted it as encouraging Christians to think themselves as better than their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Because notice what we might do if we're not careful. Moses disappears, Elijah disappears from the mountain top. But Jesus remains and that's enough, because he's still there. But the cloud from which the voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5) also disappeared. Do we really thing we can do without God?<sup>14</sup> Walking away from our Jewish roots may cut us off from more than we bargained for, which may be part of the argument that both Matthew and Jesus are making from that mountain top.

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<sup>13</sup> Anti-Defamation League, "Anti-Semitism in the U.S.", Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us> (accessed February 18, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Knight, 139.