

A SHRINE ON A MOUNTAIN

MATTHEW 17:1-9 (NRSV) *Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Keep your Bible open—there’s more to the story.)*

Peter said, "Let's just stay here. We can build three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah; and we can just stay here."

I think I know how he felt. I love the mountains. I recall backpacking in 1987 with Colin in the Pecos Wilderness in New Mexico. We hiked up to a natural lake in a glacial cirque around 12,600 feet above sea level.

It was a great trip. I love the mountains. And when I go there and spend time there I always experience a little grief when I have to leave. I just want to stay. I think I know how Peter felt.

Native Americans near Sedona, Arizona, identified places in nature where spiritual energy is especially alive. It is said that the energy swirls, like a vortex; and, in those places the trees exhibit the swirling of that energy. I've hiked to several of those places, and meditated there. I think I know how Peter felt.

Oh, I know Peter's experience was different. It wasn't the mountain—Mount Tabor. I know. I've been to that mountain, too. It's no taller than Pinnacle Mountain; and kind of stands out in a field all by itself. It wasn't the mountain; it was what happened there that led Peter to exclaim, "Let's just stay here." Still, I think I know how he felt. This text may be the origin of the term, "Mountaintop Experience." And I've had my share of them:

- *In a revival meeting;
- *Singing in some choir, or playing in some orchestra;
- *Hearing a particularly moving solo or a great gospel quartet;
- *Sometimes a time of prayer takes me to the mountaintop.

There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A thin place is where the veil that separates heaven and earth is exceedingly thin. The distance between life as we

know it and God's Kingdom is much closer than we might realize.

Along the west coast of Scotland, nestled among the Inner Hebrides, is the tiny island of Iona. In 563 A.D. an Irish monk named Columba brought the story of Jesus to that tiny island, and over the next several centuries much of the growth of Christianity in Europe spread from that unlikely place. Several abbeys were built there over the centuries and the most recent one fell into disrepair in the early 20th century. During the Great Depression a Church of Scotland pastor, George McLeod, hired builders and artisans to renovate the historic abbey. There, in response to what he saw as a growing gap between the church and working people, he founded the Iona Community.

Today, people from all over the world come to Iona for retreats and to experience the "thin place"—the place of feeling especially close to God; highly emotional experiences; times of high resolve, in which there is a determination to do, or to be something special, to really serve God in a deeper way.

I know people who spend most of their lives looking for the "thin places"; the mountaintops: going from one church to another; one prayer group to another; one preacher to another; one rally to another; like an addict looking for another "fix," never settled, never satisfied.

I can't put down the mountaintop experience. They've had too much meaning in my own life. My decision to answer God's call to the ministry was made during such a time. Mountaintop experiences are good. It's only natural to want to stay.

Maybe Peter had a little extra incentive to stay. Only six days earlier Jesus had burst Peter's balloon. Big time. That was when Jesus had asked, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter had said, "You are Messiah; the Son of the Living God."

Matthew says, "From that day on Jesus began to tell the disciples how he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Peter took him aside and scolded him: "Jesus! What's wrong with you? Messiahs don't talk like that! Messiahs ride in leading a Cavalry charge; white horse, banners flying, bugles blaring! Cannons blazing! You know that!"

And Jesus turned on Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" *He called him "Satan!"* "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Whew!!! How ego-shattering! How confusing! For six centuries one school of rabbis had taught exactly how the Messiah would come, what he would do, how he would do it... *This wasn't it! Messiah suffering? Dying? Messiah meant a throne; not a cross.*

But, cross or throne, one thing was sure: God spoke on the mountain and said, "This is my Son; listen to him." It was a "thin place"; and they wanted to stay. "Let's build a shrine on the mountain and just stay here." And I think I understand.

But they had to come down. And when they reached the bottom of the mountain there was neither a throne nor a cross; just the common, teeming crowds with their every-day problems.

The vacation was great! Your body aches from eleven hours in the car, and your eyes burn from the glare of headlights, but your soul is renewed and the memories still dance in your head: the sunset over the canyon; the fresh, clean mountain air, the peaceful sounds of the night: no traffic noises, no sirens, no trains; just the chirp of crickets, the sound of running water and a gentle wind in the treetops. Nature's lullaby.

Then you open your front door. "Somebody"—that mysterious little poltergeist who inhabits houses with his sister, "Not Me"—"Somebody" didn't close the door to the freezer before you left. The odor is foul; the utility room floor is a mess; and the answering machine is beeping away with its good news: the check you mailed to pay your car insurance bounced. Your insurance lapsed while you were on vacation. You're driving an uninsured car.

At the bottom of the mountain there's neither a shrine nor a cross; just the spouse and the kids and the job and the bills and the grouchy checker at the grocery store and the runny noses and the daily headlines... At the bottom of the mountain our plans never seem to work; our dreams of glory and heroism don't materialize, our resolve falters and we fail to follow through with our commitments.

At the bottom of the mountain, here's what Peter, James and John found:

vs 14-16: When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵"Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

That's why Peter had wanted to stay on top of the mountain. But sooner or later we all must come down from the mountaintop. But that's where Jesus was at his best: touching, healing, teaching, forgiving... And maybe that's where we can find our good news: It's not what happens in the thin places that gives us strength; it's who was there with us.

That same one is with us here in the valley; in the valley, where it's even more important that we heed the voice from the Thin Place: "This is my Son; listen to him."