

Luke 9:28-36

Mountains

February 27, 2022

It is Transfiguration Sunday today and also black history month here in Canada. The convergence of the National intention along with our scripture reading about a trek up a mountain brought to mind a speech by Martin Luther King J.R. I give you excerpts from this recording.

[https://www.google.com/search?q=mlk+mountaintop+speech&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enCA862CA862&oq=MLK+Moun&aqs=chrome.0.0i512j69i57j0i512l4j0i10i512j0i512l3.9201j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=mlk+mountaintop+speech&rlz=1C1CHBF_enCA862CA862&oq=MLK+Moun&aqs=chrome.0.0i512j69i57j0i512l4j0i10i512j0i512l3.9201j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

MLK went to the mountain, and I am moved by his description of his communion with God and the challenges before him. Walking with God on the mountain in no way implies perfection; a little bit like the flawed heroes of our bible stories (people like Moses, Elijah, and Peter). God nonetheless finds us on the mountain and chooses to walk with us with. Neither was MLK lulled into any form of prosperity gospel which shies away from the suffering of Jesus and those who take up their cross to follow after him. In fact, it was the very next morning, the morning after this speech, that MLK was assassinated. Jesus, as we know, also understood the risks involved with confronting the powers and principalities—note here that just prior to the transfiguration account Eric read earlier that Jesus foretells his future suffering and death.

The text leaves me with two questions I would like to explore today. First, what is this mountain of God of which MLK spoke and to which the scribe of Luke 9 point us? Secondly, what is significant about the presence of the various characters who convene on the mountain? We begin with “the mountain” (9.28).

The mountain, in Luke’s gospel, has a definite article and not an indefinite article. It is “the” mountain and not “a” mountain, and that is noteworthy. The narrator clearly has a mountain in mind, but it is not named. Throughout the scriptures the mountain of God appears several places, and surprisingly the geography of “the mountain”—God’s Mountain—shifts. Mt. Sinai, also named Mt Horeb, is named the Mountain of God (see Exodus 3:1), and it was somewhere in the wilderness beyond the Red Sea (sea of reeds). Mt. Carmel was the sight of God’s triumph over the prophets of Baal (1<sup>st</sup> Kngs 18:20) and then Elijah meets God in the silence of Mt. Horeb (1<sup>st</sup> Kngs 19:11ff). Our Psalm for today, like Psalm 2:6, references the “Mountain of God” more in relation to Mt. Moriah which is also called Mt. Zion. In the book of Zechariah it is from the Mt. of Olives (14:4ff) that God launches an offensive to reclaim Jerusalem. It was from that same Mt. of Olives that Jesus marched into Jerusalem to re-sanctify the temple mount and on that Mount that he was arrested. So many mountains on which the Divine has been met.

One commentary I was reading this week suggested that the mountain of God could be any number of mountain tops. The expression of “my holy hill” or the mountain of God “should not be translated so that it means “my tabooed

mountain,” but rather that it is dedicated to God”.<sup>1</sup> This opens the possibility that places we sanctify, that we dedicate, for service or worship of God might be considered God’s Holy Hill. All the mountains in the biblical text which I cited are locations where God’s people have seen a revelation of the God in whom we live and have our being. In this respect any place where there is a sense of a dedicated sacred space can become “the mountain of God”. Biblical scholars Rhoads and Michie elaborate on this point.

The mountain is a setting of refuge and safety in [the biblical text]. Jesus warns that, at the threat of war, people in Judea should “flee to the mountains”. Mountains also suggest closeness to God. Jesus often retreats to a mountain to pray, for example after feeding a crowd in the desert, and in Gethsemane before his arrest.

The mountain is also a setting for revelation. On [the mountain of today’s Luke text] glory comes upon Jesus and a voice reveals to the three disciples that Jesus is God’s son. On the Mountain of Olives, Jesus reveals to four disciples the future of God’s rule in prophecies and warnings. In Israelite history, God gave the Law to Moses on a mountain, and later to Elijah<sup>2</sup> This understanding fits very nicely with research done by Joseph Campbell from a previous generation. The Ogalala Sioux, of the Central Plains, understood there to be a central mountain in the world. In their context it was Harney Peak located in Black Hills of South Dakota; and to them it was the sacred peak. And yet their drawings of Harney Peak are actually depictions of Devil’s Tower located in Wyoming.<sup>3</sup> Sacred mountains tend to move around!

Questions for our consideration... Where do any of us go for protection, affirmation or confirmation? Where do we go to behold transfiguration or revelation? Is it Quill Hill at Shekinah? Is it on the couch with candles? Is it on a familiar trail? The sacred place we hold dear is, in fact, “the mountain of God”.

Second Question: why have the characters of today’s scripture reading gone up the mountain? Let us begin with Peter, James and John. No doubt they ascend the sacred mountain for a variety of reasons: obligation, boredom, curiosity perhaps. In addition to these possibilities, I think the text points us towards a rational of renewal; maybe even forgiveness. I suggest this from the flow of the narrative.

Earlier in Luke 9 (vv 10-17) the disciples are faced with a crowd of hungry people. The disciples ask Jesus to send them away. In an area with no bakeries or

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<sup>1</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn, *A handbook on Psalms* as part of the UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), p. 26; and in relation to Psalm 99:9 p. 851.

<sup>2</sup> David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 66-67

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 89

fast food Jesus tells them, “You give them something to eat”. The disciples seriously questions the manner in which 5,000 could be fed with five loaves and two fish. Jesus is not phased by their insubordination, and hungry souls are fed. The next episode of Luke 9 (vv 21-27) details the suffering and death Jesus will face. In the parallel texts of the same story from Mark and Matthew, both of which precede the transfiguration in those Gospels, Peter actually rebukes Jesus for uttering such things about the fate of God’s messiah.<sup>4</sup> Still the disciples follow Jesus up the hill. Once on the mountain peak they are weighed down with sleep, which in Paul’s epistles often suggests having lost one’s spiritual way.<sup>5</sup> A voice comes out of a cloud identifying Jesus as God’s beloved. In direct communication to those disciples, and we disciples, the words are clear—“listen to him”.

Even after beholding transfigurations the disciples prove a frustratingly dense crew. No disciple gets it right all the time and only a few get it right most of the time. The disciples of today’s story set aside past failures and the reality of future stumbling to follow where Jesus asks them to go. Despite past fumbles and future bumbles, God mediates grace to them and even through. A lesson for us?

What is Jesus doing up on the mountain? Verse 28 notes that Jesus went up the mountain to pray. At various times in Luke’s gospel Jesus retreats from the crowds (e.g. 9:10) and often for prayer. Hungry crowds, hostile religious leadership, and Roman occupation take their toll even on the likes of Jesus. We all benefit from encouragement and reconnecting with the Ground of our being. If such was the case for Jesus, how much more so for us?

What are Moses and Elijah doing up on the mountain? Speculation has been that Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, are there to convey the manner in which Jesus held together the Torah (the five books of Moses) and the prophetic stream (represented in Elijah). This makes good sense, but I think their presence signifies even more.

Both Moses & Elijah met God at Mt. Horeb in the midst of challenging times within their ministry. Divine encouragement happens on Mountains. Both Moses & Elijah are heroes of faith who do not actually see their Divine commissions fulfilled. Joshua succeeds Moses in leading the people into a new land and Elisha finishes up two of three tasks God assigns to Elijah (Hazel and Jehu) on Mt. Horeb. God’s work continues long after we are gone: encouragement for Jesus and us.

What is God doing on top the mountain? Presiding at the communion of saints past and present is my take. Affirming God’s guiding in the past, affirming the present, giving direction and hope for the future. God uses an imperative in telling and compelling disciples to pay attention to Jesus. Follow him in holding together

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<sup>4</sup> (Mark 8:31-33 & Matt 16:21-23).

<sup>5</sup> See 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:6 as an example.

the law and prophets. Jesus did this non-violently in the midst of Roman occupation. The early church resisted non-violently as well. Mennonites have done this. Russian Orthodox Christians did this under the old USSR. MLK did it in the midst of serious racial tension. We draw strength from a whole multitude of the faith filled servants of God through the centuries. And one of those stories is how I would like to conclude today's sermon.

Viola Irene Desmond...businesswoman, civil rights activist. Viola Desmond built a career and business as a beautician and was a mentor to young Black women in Nova Scotia. In 1946, Viola Desmond challenged racial discrimination when she refused to leave the segregated Whites-only section of the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia.<sup>6</sup>

The National Post reported that Viola Desmond's faith was might in her life, "She attended the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, and its famous minister, Dr. William Pearly Oliver, persuaded her to fight the matter of being arrested at the movie house, and offered her the support and encouragement of the congregation to do so." Dr. Oliver later reflected on Desmond's legacy... "This meant something to our people. Neither before or since has there been such an aggressive effort to obtain right. The people arose as one and with one voice. This positive stand enhanced the prestige of the Negro community throughout the Province. It is my conviction that much of the positive action that has since taken place stemmed from this".<sup>7</sup>

Viola Desmond was unable to remove the charges against her and went unpardoned in her lifetime. Desmond's courageous refusal to accept an act of racial discrimination provided inspiration to later generations of Black persons in Nova Scotia and in the rest of Canada. In 2010, Lieutenant-Governor Mayann Francis issued Desmond a free pardon. In December 2016, the Bank of Canada announced that Viola Desmond would be the first Canadian woman to be featured by herself on the face of a banknote — the \$10 note released on Nov 19, 2018.<sup>8</sup>

We follow Jesus up the mountain. We try to stay awake for the transfigurations. We learn again to listen to the Christ. We go down the mountain and continue the journey come what may. May we find grace and courage upon the mount. May we find grace and courage on the Way. Amen

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/viola-desmond>

<sup>7</sup> Susan Ponting, "Viola Desmon—a true Heroine of Canada's Civil Rights Movement (July 6, 2018) at: <https://contextbeyondtheheadlines.com/viola-desmond-a-hero-of-the-civil-rights-movement>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/viola-desmond>