

## **Don't Become Numb to the Spectacular**

In Scripture, mountaintops are holy places. Whenever someone in the biblical story goes to the top of a mountain, a profound encounter with God is about to happen. In our Old Testament reading, God summons Moses to the top of Mount Sinai where God will give to Moses, engraved on stone, the law and the commandments, God's covenant with the people. The writer wants to make it abundantly clear that, in ascending the mountain, Moses is entering the very presence of God. The mountain top is covered with the same cloud that had guided Moses and the people during their wandering and then, out of that cloud, the glory of God appeared like a fire.

In our gospel reading, Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James and John to the summit of Mount Tabor and they too have a profound encounter with God. Suddenly, two of the heroes from their Jewish faith, Moses and Elijah, appear before them even though they both were long dead. And then God speaks to them out of a cloud, saying about Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him."

The similarities in the two stories are striking. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew wants the reader to associate this story with the reading from Exodus. Both stories take place on top of a mountain. Moses appears to Jesus and the disciples reminding the reader of Moses' place in their history. In both stories, God appears on the mountaintop in a cloud. And in both stories, God speaks.

But at the end of the story, Matthew takes a surprising turn that differentiates itself from the other mountaintop stories in Scripture. After Moses received the commandments from God on Mount Sinai, the people built the tent of meeting, a place to house the stone tablets in the tabernacle. And the same cloud that brought God's presence to the mountain, enters the tent of meeting. Even though Moses came down from the mountain, the mountain top experience continues.

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, Peter thinks he knows what to do next. After Moses and Elijah appear before them and Jesus becomes dazzling white, Peter wants to do what his ancestors did. He wants to build a tent, a dwelling place for the glory of God. He wants the mountaintop experience to continue. But that's not what happened. God tells Peter and the others to listen to Jesus and then, all of a sudden, Moses and Elijah are gone. The cloud containing the presence of God is gone. It is just Peter, James, and John alone with Jesus. There would be no tents built. The mountaintop experience wouldn't go down the mountain with them. All they had was exactly what they had when they ascended the mountain in the first place – they had Jesus, they had each other, and they had the work they were called to.

I think the message God was trying to teach them was that that present reality was enough. Friends, I think so often we humans think we have to escape our present reality in some way to encounter the presence of God. Peter tried to do that in at least two ways. He wanted to stay on top of the mountain, to stay in a place of beauty and wonder where it might be a little easier

to sense God's presence. And he tried to go back in time, to build a tent where Moses and Elijah, his heroes of the past could stay with him. He wanted to escape his present reality by both living in the past and by staying on the mountaintop.

I think all of us are like Peter from time to time. It's so tempting to think we have to go back, back to the good old days, back to when our heroes of the past were alive and active, back to when it seemed like things were better.

Or we think we have to find a way to escape. We think we have to get away from the mundane, from the ordinary to truly experience the glory of God.

Both of these temptations – to bring the past back or to escape our present reality – are rooted in the belief – maybe even subconsciously – that the presence of God is somewhere else.

But the story of Jesus' transfiguration begs to differ. My seminary classmate, Isaac Villegas writing for the Christian Century says, "Transfiguration is not a heavenly escape from this earthly life. The mountaintop experience is not a call to travel to an elsewhere, a vantage point from which to diagnose what's wrong with this life, or a site from which to propose a remedy for our communities. The transfiguration narrative turns the disciples back to the place they already know, back to the familiar... Transfiguration is an invitation to return to our communities and our lives with renewed attention and patience, awaiting the luminescence of the mundane. To attend to the present and wonder at the ordinary; to let this life astonish us with the sacred."

I can understand why mountaintops play such a prominent role in Scripture. Nature has always been my most important cathedral. It's where I feel closest to and most in awe of God. Nature is where I can gain the most clarity about my life and the world around me. As I stand on the edge of a cliff and stare at the majesty around me, I feel small, but not in a way that makes me feel insignificant. I feel small in the sense that I am held by something so much greater than me.

I experience nature most fully when I go hiking, but hiking is not easy, especially if it's a difficult hike. Two years ago, I went hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with my college best friend and long-time hiking partner Matt. It was an incredible trip. The White Mountains are some of the most beautiful, rugged, and simply awe-inspiring places on the planet. All total, we hiked [a 24 mile, 2-night backpacking loop](#) and another [9 mile day hike](#).

To do that kind of a hike in the rugged White Mountains requires coming to a place of acceptance. It requires leaning into the monotony of a long hike and slowly releasing my resistance to the pain of the climb and begin to practice acceptance of each hard and painful step up a mountain. What I often find is that when I lean into that kind of acceptance on a hard hike, I also lean into acceptance of other hard things in my life that I cannot change and I become more aware of the challenges and pains that other people I know and love are experiencing.

During the hardest climb of our hike, as I gave up resistance and began to settle into a rhythm of acceptance and pain, maybe my most important thought of the trip came into my mind.

“Don’t become numb to the spectacular.”

The spectacular was not just the destination, the summit of the mountain, but it was all around me if I could just pay attention to it. As I tried to not only accept the pain of the climb but to pay attention to all that was around me, I started to pay attention to the spectacular that is always present, not just on a hike but all the time.

Just like the climb up the mountain was excruciating, there was still beauty all around, so too, as the struggle of life takes its toll, there is also tremendous beauty all around us if we can intentionally choose to see it.

One of my favorite writers, Kate Bowler, wrote a book called *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. Kate is a professor at Duke Divinity school and her life and career seemed to be taking off when suddenly she was diagnosed with Stage 4 Cancer and everything seemed to fall apart around her. Her book is her memoir of how her cancer diagnosis impacted her life and her faith in hard, but at times surprisingly beautiful ways. One line in that book that has become her motto is, “Life is so hard. Life is so beautiful.”

She’s right. Life can be so hard sometimes and yet life is still beautiful, still spectacular if we can just remember to see it, to not become numb to it. I often think about how easy it is to become numb to the pain that is around us –the horrific stories coming out of Ukraine, or the brutal beating and killing of Tyre Nichols, or the mass shooting at Michigan State, or the man begging for money at the street corner or just how many people we know and love who are sick or grieving or dealing with really hard things. When there’s that much pain, we have to work to not become numb to it.

But, I think there’s also a tendency to become numb to the spectacular also. We don’t often use that language. Instead we talk about not taking things for granted.

That language makes sense. But somehow, on my hike in the White Mountains, not taking the beauty for granted didn’t seem to fully encapsulate what I was feeling. The White Mountains were not merely something to not take for granted. They are mountains of which the only appropriate response is awe. They are truly spectacular.

But so is so much of life. A seed that planted into some composted dirt can sprout and grow and produce a lovely tomato is spectacular. The chocolate cake that Nina and I have made umpteen times during the pandemic is pretty spectacular (if I do say so myself). And even though life is filled with pain, frustrations, and difficulties the truth is that the spectacular is still right around the next corner if I can only look up to see it.