

A River Through The Desert

Week 3: Mountain



Mount Tabor in Galilee

1 Reflection

A thoughtful reading of the Bible shows that many of the themes and important events in the New Testament are prefigured by themes and events in the Old Testament. This will hold true for much of what we consider in this Lent course. As mentioned before, Matthew, in his gospel account, can be seen to be presenting Jesus as a new Moses leading people out of slavery into liberation. So, it is

not surprising that the mountain of Sinai should find some reflections in the life of Jesus.

Throughout the Old Testament, significant events occur in high places: Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal, the giving of the Ten Commandments on Sinai (Exodus 19 & 20) and King David choosing a 'mountain' (Mount Zion), in Jerusalem to place the Ark of the Covenant. That site is identified with the same mountain where Abraham proved willing to take the life of his son, Isaac as an offering to God. It is also the same place that King Solomon constructed the Jerusalem Temple. Indeed, Jerusalem, the Holy City, is a city 'built on a hill'. Jerusalem covers several hills often called 'mountains' or 'mounts', for example, the Mount of Olives



The Mount of Olives in Jerusalem

which is so familiar to Christians. In reality, 'hill' feels like a more accurate description on the basis of its height.

It should not surprise us at all, that significant events take place on mountains in Jesus's life too. All of this is not accidental. Early Jewish thinking structured creation in three tiers with a literal understanding of the heavens above the earth and the underworld beneath the earth. In their thinking, God did literally live in the heavens. As a result, the top of a mountain brought one nearer to the presence of God and encounters with God could be expected to

occur on those high places. Once again, the treasured account of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12) when he gave to the people a framework for living, is suggestive of Moses who came down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Moses had to go up the mountain for his encounter with the Lord; he needed to high up and therefore, near to God.

In our own times we might wistfully look to the sky seeking a word from God to guide or comfort us, but we do not seriously imagine 'up there' as the actual dwelling place of God. We surely know that God cannot be confined by space or time. And yet we might still have a sense that a walk up a high hill or a mountain could be an opportunity for a profound spiritual experience. It is often said that these are 'thin places' where the space between heaven and earth seems particularly permeable and hence, we might feel the presence of God in an especially powerful way.

On occasion, Jesus seems to have encouraged the same thing with his disciples. Soon after Peter's declaration to Jesus that 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16:16), Jesus takes a few of his closest disciples 'up a high mountain'. Since the 4th century AD, this has been identified as Mount Tabor a few miles to the west of the Sea of Galilee. It rises sharply up from the Valley of Jezreel and dominates the landscape. Up on the mountain, Jesus is transfigured by a bright shining light and the disciples have a profound and impactful religious experience – the prophets Moses and Elijah appear amongst them. This might seem strange to us but the disciples, though shocked, would have made the necessary connection: Moses and Elijah both encountered God on Mt Sinai. These encounters were also revelations. On the mountain, Moses received the Ten Commandments and Elijah received a new and significant vocation (1 Kings 19:18). Peter, James and John witnessed an eye-opening disclosure. Jesus is bathed in dazzling light and a voice from heaven declares Jesus is God's



The Jezreel Valley from the top of Mount Tabor

'Son, the Beloved'. This event, known to us as 'the Transfiguration' is most often interpreted to have implications, not only for how we understand Jesus, but how as believers we should see the whole of God's creation. If God's shining presence can be seen in the face and clothing of Jesus, then perhaps the eyes of faith will see God's shining presence in everything: the sound of birdsong, a kind and unexpected act or a vulnerable child in need of care.

The entire Holy Land is scattered with low mountains and hilly ranges. Jerusalem is a hilly city which affords several spectacular vistas onto the ancient parts of the Holy City but also views into the wilderness. It was the geography of the land which Jesus and all the Biblical characters

were familiar with as their physical environment. The land helped to shape their understanding of God and their experience of faith. Pilgrims to the Holy Land often find that travelling in and walking this land causes them to gain a fresh understanding of Jesus, the entire Biblical story and sometimes of their own experience of God.

I have a strong and important memory of being on pilgrimage on the island of Iona off the West coast of Scotland. One day, our church group of adults and children made the climb up Dun I, the highest point of the island. It was a typical island day in October – grey and blowing a gale. When we got to the top we were almost immediately blown right back down to the bottom. We had a memorable half an hour on top, buffeted by the weather and laughing together. I was struck then and have remembered ever since that overwhelming sense of the force of nature which spoke to me of God’s invigorating creative power. It was only really possible to have that experience at the top of Dun I and it seemed to bring us all close to God in an unusual way.

COVID-19 has given many people a fresh appreciation of their local, natural environment. Walks intended first as a means of getting out of the house and exercising have led people to see things in nature that they have previously missed. Prayerful walking can also help us to perceive the presence of God in our locality or in our favourite walking places. In the Nicene Creed we declare that ‘through (Christ) all things were made’, in which case we should anticipate that we receive intimations (or more) of Jesus Christ in the world, in its natural beauty, in the love and generosity of others and in the face of people in need in our world. Perhaps Jesus’s disciples were open to the revelation of Christ’s true identity because of the resplendent beauty of what they saw on and from Mount Tabor. We too can have heart and mind opened to fresh insights as we explore the beauty of creation.



The Church of the Transfiguration, Mt Tabor

2 Watch the film:

The Mountain: <https://youtu.be/IfrijW-T3As4> (YouTube)

3 Bible reading: Matthew 17: 1-13

Read the passage once or twice

4 Questions

- 1 Is the story of the Transfiguration one that draws you in and speaks to you or one that feels hard to penetrate? Explore your reactions and what appeals or does not appeal to you in the story.
- 2 What does the image of Jesus 'shining like the sun...his clothes white as the light' suggest to you? How does it affect how you see and understand Jesus?
- 3 Have you had a 'mountain top experience'? Share this or write it down to explore your experience; perhaps it might inspire a poem or a sketch.
- 4 How can you begin or continue to cherish nature as a place to experience God?
- 5 In the film there is a point made about 'seeing things differently' or seeing from the perspective of the 'divine eye'. What does this mean to you?

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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