

Last Epiphany Year A 2014

“Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God, and worship him upon his holy hill.”

There is something about a mountain. When we were in Austin, our granddaughter Elliott spent the night with us a couple of nights. The guest house in which we stayed was down the hill from the main house. The chicken coup with which she was most interested was up the hill... a hill which to two year old eyes must have looked like a mountain... so I named it so (grand daddies can do that)... Let's go up the mountain I would say to Elliot, and she would become ecstatic with anticipation... took every step up the hill quite deliberately... When going to bed she would ask... Are we going to climb the mountain tomorrow... Something had quickened in her nascent imagination.

Months after our visit just the other night I talked to Elliot on the phone, and she asked, “when are you coming to see us Bobo, so we can climb the mountain...” the image still fixed in her mind... I remember the first mountain I saw as a child. It was Monte Santo in Huntsville... “Holy mountain”.... the mountain upon which my grandparents lived. So much of who I am engendered there... It was pure magic to see it appear on the horizon at the end of the long road trip upstate, or from an airplane window... and watching it fade from view at our returning home... I still feel the ecstasy when I think about returning to Holy mountain... where my favorite grandparents lived gilded in my imagination like flesh and blood Olympians... that mountain still beacons me home in wistful ancestral sonority.

Mountains of course pervade human mythology... mythology, the deep grammar of our being. They are sacred all over the planet, in every religion in the world... Mt. Olympus in Greece, we know the best... the home of the gods... Mt. Emmei Shan in China, the sacred mountain of Lao Tsu.... Mt. Meru in Tibet sacred to the Hindu, the Buddhists, the Jainists, and the Bon Po, ancient forerunners to Buddhism... Mt. Fuji for the Shinto in Japan... Mt. Blanca in Colorado, sacred to the Navajo.... Mt. Ululu, or Ayers Rock, sacred to the aboriginal tribes of Australia.. Kilimanjaro, the Masai ... There is something about a mountain. Humans have scaled mountains since time immemorial... philosophers, sages, and prophets have climbed them to find enlightenment in that rarefied air. Perhaps it is the lack of oxygen, or perhaps the proximity to the sun and stars that evoke dreams and visions there.

In today's gospel reading Jesus and three disciples ascend, we are told, a high mountain... some say Mt. Tabor in Galilee... some say Mt. Hermon some fifty miles to the north at Caesarea Philippi... It doesn't matter; it only matters that we are dealing with mythology here, the deep grammar of human lore... and in mythology there is something about a mountain... some informative truth deep down in our collective imagination.

The writer here is overt with his theology. He has Jesus appearing dazzling white, as bright as the sun, we are told, a symbol of the presence of the divine; and he appears along with Moses and Elijah... Matthew is unabashed in proclaiming that Jesus is the new *type* to represent God in earth, just like Moses and Elijah before him... his ancestry in the faith... Moses the Law, and Elijah the prophet... Jesus the type, the consummation of history, the law and the prophets, the archetype of God's chosen, the one to bear God's identity to lead the people Israel into a renewed liberation... into the very kingdom of God... into the created order that God intends for us.... As Moses received the will of

God for God's people upon Mt. Sinai, so Jesus along with his disciples receive the will of God for the new Israel, and in the scheme of things the gentile world as well. But Jesus receives this vision, this dream along with his followers, unlike Moses... which is not accidental for Matthew, and a most important point... This revelation is not private knowledge to Jesus alone but this revelation is to a movement, to a people... there is no Jesus without the movement, the following he as archetype represents.

In the Hebrew narrative of beginnings in Genesis and Exodus... God creates the world and puts it under the direction of the sun and the moon... and then we are told that God inhabits the mountain tops... and then lo and behold, God descends into the very camp of Israel, and dwells among them... carried among them in the Ark.... This is a story, as all of scripture is a story... about incarnation... The story of God with us as God bearers... a story of identity, a story of our true nature.... And here, in Matthew, Jesus finds his identity... and the movement finds its identity as well there on the mountain top... and they must, like Moses, descend the mountain bearing the divine life into the world below... they must bear the dream down from the mountain top.

And what sort of dream is this... this dream, this vision encountered at Sinai... and encountered once again here on the mountain of Transfiguration... It is a dream, a vision of our true identity... Jesus the mythological archetype... He is dazzling like the sun with mercy and compassion and inclusion and embrace and peace and justice... Remember the vision at Sinai... It was a vision of the law... the gracious means by which we people live with each other as God would have it... It is the vision of the true identity of a people... what it means to be human made in God's image... a gracious order in which one can live in gratitude despite the anxiety and fear that presses upon us... there is nothing supernatural about this, but truly natural... the vision of the way we are made for the world... to live in common in which we are joined to each other in an unbreakable solidarity that nurtures an unvanquishable hope.... There is nothing else in all of life when all is said and done but this sacred hope.... Hope that gets us up in the morning... hope that bears always the real possibility of new life... hope for which we can only be grateful... and hope that banishes all fear... Hope revealed in the rarified air of the mountain... the rest is illusion.

And in both stories... old and new testaments... in both stories the dramatic force is that the ones who have received such a dazzling vision must come down from the mountain... down the mountain into the mess... the Mess that is humanity.... Brothers and sisters, our call is to love the mess... For it is in the mess that God makes God's home... It is in the mess that resurrection germinates... It is in the mess that creativity is born, from which new life springs. If you don't love the mess you will never find joy, I promise you... you must love the mess, a sacred paradox to be sure... wisdom from the mountain... Love the mess around us and the mess within us... be vulnerable to it.... Our singular vocation is to bear hope, hope engendered by love to... and in... and for the mess... That is our identity as people of faith.... To enact hope... to be hope for our world broken by the yoke of indignity and violence... We are to come down the mountain bearing the dream, the vision of a world set right... giving account, bearing the deep grammar of the hope within us... for such a hope made visible I believe will change the world.

I'll leave you with one last image... In our Eucharist... our Holy meal... we make our pilgrimage up the mountain.... Yes, these steps are not accidental... In the early

ancient Temples across cultures the steps to the altar were representative of climbing the holy mountain... We will enact that this morning... we will climb with deliberate step the mountain and receive the body and blood... the body and blood of Christ... and therefore we will receive our own body and blood... We will ingest, as it were, our true identity... We are, dear friends, food for the world... food blessed broken and given for a world starving for it... It is the identity of God we share, loving souls that know to give only... deep in our ancestral DNA we know it... like the memory of mountains, mysterious, calling, calling us to know what we've always known... calling us for love... calling us for hope... luminous souls we are all made to be...shining, dazzling like the sun.... Believe it with all your heart.... Believe it!