

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, February 26, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1-9
“Mountain glory”

When I visited Israel in 1988, one of the places that our guide took us to was Muhraka, on Mount Carmel. Strictly speaking, Mount Carmel is not a mountain but a range of hills above the town of Haifa in Galilee, the north of the country. With its highest point only about 550 metres above sea level, it is maybe the sixth highest point in Israel.

The reason our guide took us there is that that is the place where tradition says Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose god was the stronger, the LORD whom Elijah worshipped or Baal. And though he was only one man against 450 of the prophets, Elijah called on God to send down fire to set his offering alight, something the prophets completely failed to do after hours of calling on their gods. Elijah therefore won the contest, and celebrated his victory in traditional fashion by putting the prophets of Baal to the sword. There is a terrace at Muhraka on the shoulder of Mount Carmel marking the spot, with a dramatic statue of Elijah, His foot is on the neck of a prophet and his sword is raised, about to deliver the fatal stroke.

I tell you that to tell you this. The terrace there commands a panoramic view of the valleys below, looking to the south and to the west. Now I am not a mountaineer. I have absolutely no head for heights. I will only go as far up a ladder as I can go with one foot firmly on the ground. So as I stood on the terrace, for the first time in my life, I could see why so many times in Scripture we read of people going up a mountain to meet God. At a time when no-one could fly, and camera drones were not yet invented, to look down from a mountain on the world below was to look from where God was.

And so we read of Abraham meeting God on Mount Moriah, Moses on Mount Horeb and then on Mount Sinai, and Elijah on Mount Carmel. We read of the Psalmist lifting up his eyes to the hills, and then to the One who made the hills, for help, and of Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives. The mountain was where God was, and the mountain was where God was to be encountered.

Not surprising then, that when Jesus was revealed to his three closest disciples and dearest friends, it should be after he *led them up a high mountain, by themselves* Matthew 17:1.

And also not surprising that Peter should want to build dwellings there, tabernacles as the King James Version puts it, so that they could stay there and hold on to the moment they had found themselves in the presence of the Almighty.

And not surprising, at least not to anyone familiar with the story of Moses on Mount Sinai, that there should be a cloud and a voice speaking from it.

And least surprising of all: that when the voice from the cloud said, *'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'* – Matthew 17:5 – the disciples should fall to the ground, overcome by fear.

It was the same reaction that the prophet Isaiah had when he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, with the hem of his robe filling the temple. He called out, *'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'* Isaiah 6:5. As the writer to the Hebrews says, *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* Hebrews 10:31.

But just as the seraph touched Isaiah's mouth with a live coal and declared that his guilt was gone and his sin blotted out, so Jesus reassured his disciples with a touch and the reassuring words, *'Get up and do not be afraid.'* Matthew 17:7.

How often have you found yourself startled, as Moses was startled, as the disciples were startled, by what Allen C McSween calls in his commentary on today's Exodus passage, "the mystical in the midst of the mundane, the awesome amid the ordinary, the breathtaking amid the boring."

Because sometimes we have to search for the mystical in the midst of the mundane, the awesome amid the ordinary, the breathtaking amid the boring. Sometimes we must consciously choose to be open to them, and treasure them when we encounter them. C S Lewis put these words into the mouth of Aslan in *The Silver Chair*:

Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.

It may happen on a mountainside as it did for Peter and James and John, but it doesn't have to be. Sometimes the mystical, the awesome, the breathtaking can break through in ways that are clear and unmistakable at the most surprising moments, sometimes in the most unexpected people. I will close with a story to illustrate this.

Jim Hunter told me this past week that his six-year-old great-granddaughter, Olivia, was visiting the aquarium in Toronto with her family. As she was leaving, she saw a man who had obviously been sleeping on the sidewalk.

She asked her family why he was there, and was told that it was because he had nowhere to stay.

She thought about it, and asked where he ate. She was told that he probably just found food wherever he could.

She thought some more, and asked her parents if she could give him her TimBits.

When she did, the man told her that she was an angel, because he had had nothing to eat for days.

Jim has a photograph of her handing over her TimBits. You don't exactly have to twist his arm to get him to show it to you.

On a February day, on a sidewalk beside a busy street in Toronto, in the action of a little girl, the mystical, the awesome, the breathtaking, the glory and the compassion of God broke through and were plain for all to see. If it can happen there, who knows where it might happen in your life?