

The New Moses

[Exodus 24:12-18](#)

[Matthew 17:1-9](#)

Transfiguration Sunday

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February 26, 2017

Every tourist who goes to Japan wants to see Mt. Fuji. Some want to climb it, but most just want to see it—without clouds! As you race by on the bullet train, you might get a glimpse, but that magnificent peak is usually lost in a cloud. A couple of years ago, Jim had a conference in Nara, and we went a day early to stay at an inn on a lake with a view of Mt. Fuji. We walked around the lake, and there before us was the grand *Fujisan*, as the Japanese people call their mountain, with only a wisp of cloud at its top.

Today's readings take us to the mountaintop and into the cloud that shrouds God's glory. Moses took one companion with him, Joshua, and instructed his other two assistants, Aaron and Hur, to be in charge of the people at the foot of the mountain. And he climbed up the mountain, but not all the way. The top was engulfed in cloud cover. So Moses waited six days. Then on the seventh day, he entered the cloud and climbed to the top. He stayed there forty days and forty nights. And when he came out of the cloud, he was changed.

Jesus climbed a mountain too. And he took with him three companions also. It was on the sixth day. When he made it to the top, he changed: his face shone and his clothes appeared bright white. And then Moses and Elijah appeared. And a bright cloud overshadowed them all, and God's voice spoke to them. And Peter, James, and John were afraid.

Mountains are fearful places. They are mysterious. They are the stuff of poetry and paintings, and humans have always called them the dwelling place of the gods.

The mountain in Exodus is called Mt. Sinai in some places in the bible, and Mt. Horeb in others. No one knows today where Mt. Horeb is. Mt. Sinai is on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. Jesus wouldn't have been in Egypt when he was on the mountain we read about. He had just been in Caesarea Philippi, which is in the north at today's border of Syria and Lebanon. That is where Mt. Hermon is today. Maybe Jesus climbed Mt. Hermon.

But we get into trouble when we try to make the bible into a history or geography lesson. The writers are talking about a mystical experience on a mountain. The bible tells us both Moses and Jesus had these. They encountered God in all of God's majesty and mystery.

It could be that Jesus never went up that specific mountain. But the writer of Matthew's Gospel wanted to paint a picture of Jesus in God's presence. The mountaintop experience was at the summit of the story of the Jewish people. From there, Moses, the beloved prophet, came into God's fiery presence and gave the people God's laws. The early followers of Jesus wanted to see Jesus in the same light as Moses. Moses had liberated the

people from slavery in Egypt; now Jesus was to liberate the people from oppression under the Romans. He told the people, "Do not be afraid." He gave them hope.

Both of these passages were likely written in times of exile and dispersion. The *Torah* was recorded from oral history while the people lived in exile in Babylon after the first fall of Jerusalem, and the Gospels were written in the diaspora after the second fall of Jerusalem. In times of dispersion and despair, we want to go to the mountaintop. We want to see God's glory and be told, "Do not be afraid."

When the Gospel of Matthew was written, Jesus became "the new Moses." He fled with his family to Egypt after his birth, in order to come out of Egypt as Moses had in the Exodus. He was rescued as an infant, much as Moses was rescued by the midwives and then by the Pharaoh's daughter. He stayed in the wilderness forty days and forty nights; Moses was in the wilderness forty years and then on the mountaintop forty days. Jesus endured conflict with the Pharisees, as Moses did with the Pharaoh. He taught his lessons about how to live, in five sections in the book of Matthew, like the Torah and its five books in the Hebrew Bible that tell the story of Moses. He fed the people loaves and fishes, as Moses fed the people manna from heaven. He appointed 70 to carry out his work (Luke 10:1), as Moses appointed seventy elders (Numbers 11:25). Jesus came to fulfill the laws of Moses. He spoke to God in tender and majestic moments. He was a servant of God, a prophet. Jesus was "the new Moses."

God speaks at the center of both texts. From out of the cloud, God called to Moses (16). From out of the cloud, God spoke in Jesus' presence: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (5).

God has spoken throughout biblical history. But cloud cover often shrouds the presence of God. We are never exactly sure who God is. Does God speak to us today? Can we experience God's glory and majesty? Are there moments when life seems to come together and make sense, and we find ourselves at peace, and we need no longer be afraid? Are we then in God's presence?

Some of us imagine God as in today's bible texts, with great authority, and our response can only be awe! We may even look up to God as if God resides on a mountaintop or in the sky. We may understand these stories as events that actually occurred as they are written.

And some of us imagine God not as a being with form and voice. But rather as a mysterious presence in us. Some would have a hard time describing God, but would simply say that there seems to be a power or an essence that is unfathomable and yet real, that brings us stability and comfort.

Some would go as far as to say that God is a creation of the human imagination to answer the unanswerable questions of life: Where did we come from? Why do things happen as they do? Who will help me when I'm down? What will happen when I die?

We cannot know who God is, for sure, except by faith. And faith is a choice. We take the step, the leap of faith, to accept that there is a God who watches over us and wants goodness and peace in our lives and in our world.

There are 60 million refugees in the world today. Refugees start with the question, "Should I stay or go?" Even in dire circumstances, they must take a real leap of faith to leave their home country and face the unknown. The family we are helping is from Kabul, Afghanistan. Sana and his family had to leave their country when the Russians invaded Afghanistan. They lived in Pakistan. Then they returned home and Sana found work with the American military. Now it has become too dangerous to stay, and they applied to come to the United States. What a lot of uncertainty and fear for their future they must feel! I am glad this family has strong faith in God and can practice their faith freely in this country. In this difficult time of adjustment, I hope they feel the presence of God.

Many of us experience the presence of God when we come out of dark times. I remember when I was in seminary attending a one-week class on religion and the arts in New York City. It was during the January intersession term. I asked my son Sepp, who was a grad student in Boston, if he would like to join me in New York and go to a couple of plays and concerts in the evenings. That was the plan, but then he got sick. The doctor said it was a throat infection and mono. I was worried about him. Would he be able to start his academic term and continue his degree? He was studying voice—would he be able to sing? I decided to take the class in New York and then spend another few days with my son in Boston. I went by bus from New York through the snow and rain and arrived in Boston at dusk. I walked down into the MTA—the Boston subway—and took a train to the end of the line, to where Sepp had an apartment. When I came up out of the subway, I was engulfed in a huge gray cloud. The pavement was gray, the slush on the sidewalk was gray, the sky was gray, even opaque. At first I didn't see Sepp standing there in his black winter coat. He shouldn't have been outside, in the cold, but I was relieved to see him. We trudged together through the sleet to his apartment. Cold and winded, we came into the warmth. The dark cloud still hung over me as we drank some hot tea together. The doctor had said to rest, and so we did. We read our books, I fixed simple meals of soup, and by the end of my stay, Sepp felt better. I was reluctant to fly home to California because his health was still a worry to me. But the danger had passed, and I had been with him, and I had done all I could do. The cloud had lifted.

If you've been a parent you know these times of worry. Will my child recover? Will he do well in school? Will he be safe—when he rides his bike in the neighborhood, or when he travels in a foreign country? Will he find his career path? These are all normal concerns, and they can weigh on a parent.

And sometimes the concerns about a child are acute and lasting. Will she overcome her shyness? Will she manage her diabetes? Will she recover from addiction? Will her marriage last? Will there be a cure for her illness?

Worries hang over us like dark clouds. They seem to fill our waking moments and cause us sleepless nights. Like Peter, whenever we can, we try to fix the problem. Often there is

little that can be done, though. It's more a change in perspective that is required. For buried in the dark cloud there is light, and in that light there is a glimpse of hope. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." Even though he would soon die and leave his followers, he told them, they need not be afraid. Even though the Israelites had been quarreling and worshipping false idols, out of the cloud came Moses, changed, and ready to bring the people God's laws that would give them security and hope.

The mountaintop is a turning point. The cloud at the top is frightening because it is filled with the unknown. And yet, in this unknown, God comes to us and assures us that life will go on. And life in the presence of the holy makes everything possible. When we see that, we are forever changed.

Transfiguration Sunday comes just before Lent so that we will remember God's glory and carry a spark of light in us through the darkness of the weeks to come. You can go down the mountain now. You can walk even in the dark valley because like Moses, like Jesus, you have seen God.