

Hespeler, 23 February, 2020 © Scott McAndless
Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

When, six days later, Jesus came up to Peter, James and John and quietly said, “Hey, what do you say that the four of us take a hike and climb up to the top of that mountain over there?” did they have certain expectations about what he was saying and what might happen? There are all kinds of reasons to think that they did.

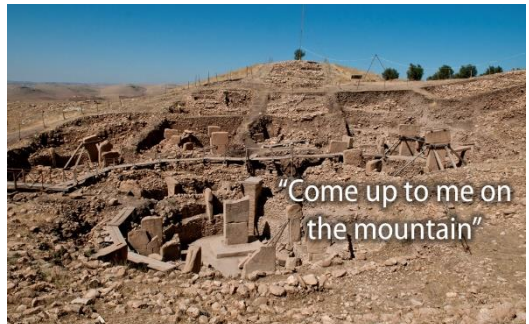
Ever since human beings (or maybe even their primitive ancestors) first stood up on their hind legs and raised their eyes to the distant horizon, those eyes were drawn to the hills and mountains that punctuated that horizon. And from very early times, they seem to have come to see those mountains as significant mostly because they were places where extraordinary things happened.

In Southeastern Turkey, not far at all from the place that the Bible seems to be talking about when it describes the location of Garden of Eden, there is a mountain called, in the local language, Göbekli Tepe. In recent years, archeologists have made some amazing discoveries at that location. They are unearthing structures made of massive stones carefully arranged in circles with even bigger t-shaped stones standing in the middle of them.

The site was clearly built up over many centuries, but the truly surprising thing about it is that there are absolutely no signs of inhabitation – there are no remains of houses, of fire pits, or of the garbage heaps that human beings seem to be so good at leaving wherever they go. Nobody actually lived there, but large numbers of people built it and visited it over many many generations. Even more astonishing, the site is over 11,000 years old.

Do you have any idea how old that is – 11,000 years? That is older than the invention of agriculture. So it wasn't built by farmers but by people who are sometimes called “hunter-gatherers.” At some point, there were primitive hunter-gatherer people who lived in that part of the Anatolian Peninsula, what is today Southeastern Turkey, who one day looked up and saw, in the distance, that mountain of Göbekli Tepe and said to one another, come, let us go up that mountain and spend enormous amounts of time and energy constructing massive circles of stone on that mountain, but let's not live there, let's just visit from time to time.

Now, hunter-gatherers don't necessarily have a lot of extra resources to spare. They tend to live at pretty close to subsistence levels. So, this was no minor decision they were making. It would have cost them a whole lot. Why, then, did they do it? The only theory that the archaeologists can come up with that makes sense is that they believed, in some sense, that if



they went to the top of that mountain and built those massive structures, they would be able to encounter God, or maybe gods, there.

And that speaks to something that I suspect is built into the human psyche. We seem to think of mountains as places for divine encounters. This is something that cuts across all people and all cultures. The ancient Celts spoke about the idea that there are places in this world, they refer to them as “thin places,” places where the boundaries between this world and some other reality that we can’t even imagine are easily penetrated. And mountains seem to be particularly thin places for many peoples. Maybe this was an idea that first occurred to people because they thought of their gods as living in the heavens and mountains were as close as you could get to the heavens while still remaining on earth. But I think that this is about more than just geography.

The Bible records many divine encounters on mountaintops. Most significantly, God invited Moses to the top of a mountain to give him the law. And it just seemed to make sense to everybody that such an important encounter had to happen in such a place. Such dynamic revelations could only happen in elevated places. Later, it would make sense to everyone that the only place to worship God was upon his holy mountain, as we read in our Psalm this morning: **“Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.”** The impulse to seek to encounter God on a mountaintop is deeply ingrained into our human souls. Maybe it has been ever since Göbekli Tepe

So yes, it seems quite likely that, when Jesus invites the three to go up the mountain with him, they are expecting that they might experience something divine. And indeed they do! They have an experience that is very much a parallel to the story of Moses on that other mountain. There is the same encompassing cloud, the same frightening light and Moses himself even shows up for the party.

There has been a lot of talk down through the centuries about what actually happened on that mountain and what it means. The story has a certain otherworldly quality to it, as if it is not quite real. Jesus himself refers to what happens on that mountain as a vision, which adds to that impression. But, whatever it was, what they experienced there seems to have been a powerful confirmation of what they had only begun to suspect about Jesus: that he was not just an ordinary person and that God was uniquely present in him.

This was not something that was clear under ordinary circumstances. Surely, as Jesus moved through the towns and villages of Galilee, he appeared to be nothing more and nothing less than an average Jewish male just like anybody else. But the unique setting of the mountaintop was a place where the inner truth of who Jesus was could literally shine through. God’s presence in Jesus became undeniable.

I think that we are all offered moments like that in our lives – moments when God is present in powerful ways. They may not all be quite as dramatic as this gospel story, but they are real. God does break through into our reality at

certain times and places. There is a universality to such experiences. Not every individual has them, of course, but every society seems to have individuals who experience such things. I think our hunter-gatherer ancestors experienced such things on Göbekli Tepe. Maybe their understanding was limited and they couldn't interpret what they saw as clearly as Moses would on his mountain or Peter, James and John would on theirs, but that doesn't mean that God wasn't there for them on their hill.

I think we do have such experiences, but the real question in this story is how are we going to respond to them. Peter's first impulse is significant. His idea is to make three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. There is something about that that seems very familiar to me, something that has been there in the human spirit for at least 11,000 years. Just as the ancient hunter-gatherers encountered something divine on top of Göbekli Tepe and said, "Guys, we have got to build something up here. I don't care if it takes us centuries and consumes all of the extra energy of our primitive hunter-gatherer societies, we are going to build something on top of this to contain and preserve this experience so that we never lose it." Peter is possessed by that very same spirit.

Why do we do that? Why do we build shrines and temples and churches on those locations where we, or perhaps where our ancestors many generations before, had those significant experiences with God? I believe it stems from a desire to tame or control such powerful experiences. We want to bind the experience within a structure or institution so that we can maybe come back and visit it from time to time, but it doesn't escape and begin to change everything in our lives.

Remember how I said that the ancient people who built Göbekli Tepe expended all of that time and effort building the shrine but that nobody actually lived there on the mountain? That was all about keeping the experience of God at a distance – letting God or the gods know that they don't have a place to speak to our daily lives but that we promise to visit them on special occasions.

Well, things really haven't changed in the many millennia since. Peter is still reacting just like the hunter-gatherers who had come to Göbekli Tepe. Though he calls what he wants to build "dwellings," (some translations have "tents" or "tabernacles") it is clearly not because he wants to live on the mountain. He wants Jesus and Moses and Elijah to stay on the mountain so that he can go on with his life without Jesus, Moses and Elijah interfering too much. He wants to keep the powerful experience of God safe and remote on the mountaintop.

And again, all of this is quite understandable. It is, as I say, what people have been doing to their powerful experiences of God for at least 11,000 years! The really surprising thing about the story of the transfiguration is not that they had that really extraordinary encounter with God, the really surprising thing is that they learned that day to deal with the experience in a new way.

God speaks. God steps into the story in a very powerful way at this point as the voice of God thunders from the enveloping cloud, **“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”** That is a pretty impressive way of making sure that we pay very close attention to what Jesus says next. Peter is given a warning that, if he ignores the next thing that Jesus says, he will be doing so at his own peril. And with such a setup, you might expect that Jesus will have a lot to say. He, like Moses was when he was covered by the enveloping cloud, is in a perfect position to deliver an entire law code and Peter, James and John would be bound to receive it as a new law.

So, our anticipation builds; what is Jesus going to say? What he does say, of course, doesn't seem to live up to the hype. All he says is, **“Get up and do not be afraid,”** and then he presumably says, “Let's go back down the mountain.” That is it: don't be afraid and let's go. But what he says must be loaded with meaning because we have been warned to pay heed to it.

And indeed it is. It marks a stunning new teaching, undoing the thing that has been built into humanity since Göbekli Tepe. For Jesus is announcing to us that, because he has come, the experience of God is not something that we have to respond to in fear. We don't have to keep the presence of God locked up in some safe spot in a temple, dwelling or tabernacle on some mountaintop. We do not need to live in fear of it because Jesus has come and brought God near.

But old habits die hard, don't they? I think that, in many ways, we are still very much like those hunter-gatherers on the ancient Anatolian Peninsula. We still want to keep God at a safe distance in some special place. Sometimes we treat our holy places, like for example, this sanctuary here, as if they were on some remote mountaintop far removed from our daily lives. We visit here, but we don't bring our whole selves here. We leave the rest of our lives out there and we try not to let the one affect the other. When Jesus said that he came to announce the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, which was his way of saying that that separation was over, God's reality was about to spill over into the daily world.

This is not a place for you to merely visit from time to time and reconnect with God, this place is where the revolution that the world still needs is supposed to begin. God is not safe here, kept apart from the struggles of the real world. The God you meet here in Jesus Christ is going with you and before you out into the world and into daily life. If that sounds like something that might change everything, you're right it is. Jesus came to change everything, especially about how we relate to God in our daily lives.