

## “Down From The Mountain”

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Exodus 24:12-18 + Matthew 17:1-9 = Mountaintop Experiences

I love Asian food, any Asian food. I love the cuisine and I always look forward in Chinese restaurants to the fortune cookie. Those fortunes are usually pretty generic. You know:

- “Today is your lucky day.” Or
- “A good way to keep healthy is to eat more Chinese food.”



Some are foreboding and border on the enigmatic:

- “You learn from your mistakes... You will learn a lot today.” Or:
- “Land is always on the mind of a flying bird.” What does that mean?

Years ago, I picked up a fortune that was more than typically inexplicable. It was so cryptic I brought it home to ponder it some more. It read:



Is it prophetic? Frightening? Empowering? Ponder it a little for yourself, as we set it aside for a moment.

Great things happen on mountains, important things, fearsome things. In Scripture, unique, once-in-a-lifetime encounters happen on mountaintops. Events of eternal



significance tend to happen on mountains ~ power-filled, fright-filled, faith-filled events.

This is not surprising as God was believed to dwell in the sky. For God to communicate most directly with us, we needed to make a substantial effort by ascending to a great height. Not so different from us today as we have placed all the important data in “the cloud.” To reach it we have to have the proper instrument, a device designed to align with it.

**A**t the burning bush on Mount Sinai, Moses encountered the true and living God, the God who is, and was, and will be, the creator of the universe, whose name is Yahweh, meaning “I am” ~ being itself. Later after the Exodus on the same

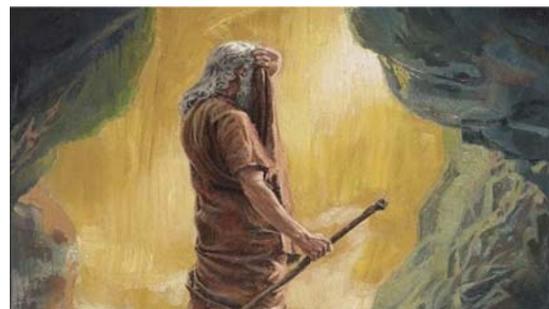


mountain, God made covenant with us to be our God, and we to be God's people.

Good things, great things, eternal things happen on mountains.

Moses' skin shown so bright from the encounter that forever after he had to wear a veil. The aura of God adhering to him was simply too awe-inspiring. The exact opposite of the Phantom of the Opera who covered his face to preserve others from disgust.

Elijah went up the selfsame mountain and encountered Yahweh there as well ~ not in the hurricane, not in the earthquake, but in the still, small voice. Jesus went up a different mountain, but a high mountain nevertheless and encountered the selfsame Yahweh. Like Moses before, Jesus was surrounded by dazzling light ~ the Shekhinah, the aura, the Spirit, the very presence of the living God.



Like Peter, James and John after an encounter with God, many times we also are paralyzed with fear. Jesus doesn't want us to get stuck there. Jesus' first words to us are: **“Get up and do not be afraid.”** First thing, we must get up and actualize the experience.

I've climbed mountains on 4 continents ~ though I am not sure if Arthur's Seat above Edinburgh counts. I've also had my share of spiritual mountaintop experiences as well.



Whether literal or metaphorical, the common thread of all such experiences is: you cannot stay on the pinnacle. Sooner or later, everyone has to come down.



Mountaintop experiences are awesome, wonderful and overwhelming all at the same time, yet more, they are exceptionally hard to integrate into everyday life. The challenge is to sustain into daily living our transformed lives ~ much harder than climbing the mountain in the first place.

Carl Dudley tells the story of young woman who had just such a life-transforming, faith-changing experience. Never before a church member, she wanted to join a congregation. The treasurer of the congregation rather pointedly glossed over her story of life-change, and instead pressed her to pledge.



She couldn't understand what finances have to do with her experience. He couldn't understand what experiencing God has to do with commitment. It began with Baby Boomers, but has accelerated through Gen Xer's and Millennials. Each successive generation is less and less devoted to institutions. Being bound to the structures was important to previous generations. How do we bridge the divide?'

This Sunday we are close to the 210<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an earthshakingly momentous event ~ of mountaintop significance if you will. The British



Parliament abolished the slave trade in March of 1807 ~ a powerful precedent setting the stage for the subsequent abolition of slavery both in the British Empire and here in the US. William Wilberforce introduced a bill for

abolition no less than 9 times before it passed.

Wilberforce was born into the wealthy class. In early adulthood he led the dilapidated life of parties and cards. His mother was horrified that he had gone to hear a firebrand preacher,



John Newton. The author of the hymn

*Amazing Grace*, Newton had been a former slave ship captain who, on being transformed by Jesus, became a priest and a spiritual leader in the movement to end slavery in England.



In those heady days, the evangelicals were the social activists. Many still are. They led crusades for human rights, workers' rights, women's rights, children's rights, immigrants' rights ~ against poverty, hunger, war, economic injustice and the slave trade.

Wilberforce not only listened carefully to Newton's preaching, but Wilberforce was attracted to the message of God's grace and justice. However, Wilberforce's mother was quickly able to divert his attention away from his newfound activism by immersing him in fashion and parties.



As the party animal son of wealthy merchants, it was easy at the age of 21 for Wilberforce to get himself elected to Parliament.

**B**ut God had other plans. In 1785 Wilberforce's life took a sudden swerve away from the high life into the redeemed life. The seeds having been planted by John Newton, Wilberforce's mountaintop experience emerged profoundly from a chance conversation with a travelling companion.

God turned his life 180°. He sought spiritual counsel from Newton for



what to do with his life. He sought help in discerning his call ~ whether he could serve God in politics. He stayed in parliament, vowing to serve God in the public arena despite the ridicule he faced. In 1789 he

introduced the first bill to abolish the slave trade.

That bill failed as did many subsequent ones. In the meantime evangelical women were joining the cause, boycotting slave-produced products, sugar, rum, tobacco and cotton, bombarding Parliament with letters. The Quakers banned slave-holders as members.

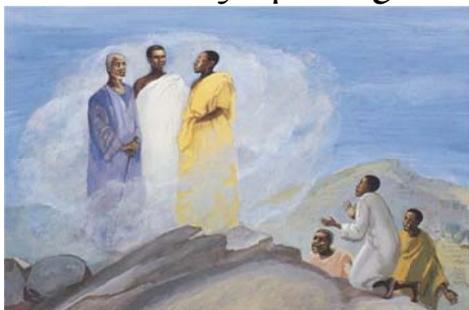
It was a hard, long fight against an entrenched, unjust economic system with global reach. After many years, many failures; and after many mountaintop experiences transformed others, in 1807 the British Empire ended the outrageous slave trade. It would take two more decades before the Empire could bring itself to emancipate the slaves. We in the US fought a bloody Civil War over the issue, while even today millions upon millions around the world still live in slavery.



A lot of this history is dramatically depicted in the movie *Amazing Grace* which came out on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the British "Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade." It details the anti-slavery movement and

the relation between Wilberforce and Newton.

**W**hat do we do when we come down from the mountain? What do we do with those superlative spiritual experiences God has chosen to bless us with? What do we do after a pinnacle experience of personal transformation under the Holy Spirit's gentle, subtle but persistent call?



First off: **"Get up and do not be afraid."** Stand up and act on it.

Then what? Do we ignore them like that treasurer asking a new believer to pledge? No, we find ways to keep them alive, even expand on them, like Wilberforce and Newton

~ we integrate these fearful, blessed, awesome, wonderful, overwhelming experiences into everyday life?

Then again we might take the enigmatic advice, the perhaps prophetic wisdom of a fortune cookie. After experiencing personal transformation we should come down from the mountain to:



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<sup>1</sup> Carl Dudley in a lecture at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 24 October 1994. (SerJ#1468)