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The View from the Mountaintop  
Exodus 24:12-18  
Matthew 17:1-9

In order to get a sense of the lifespan of the Green Mountains, we have to stretch our sense of the passing of time to its limits. The geological term for the birth of mountains is orogeny, from the Greek words for mountain and creation. The orogeny of the Green Mountains starts 1.4 billion years ago, when two landmasses collided and part of the edge of that collision was pushed upward into a mountain range. Mountains actually keep growing until the forces that pushed them upward wane and erosion, the process that gradually wears them down, becomes primary. That first mountain range eventually eroded down over millions of years to hills. If we fast forward to 450 million years ago, the rocks that remained from that first orogeny became part of another mountain range. After millions of years of erosion, this range is what we know as the Green Mountains. It is mind-bending to try to conceptualize the lifespan of these mountains that we see, walk beside, and hike up. At the same time we're aware of the ancient story of the mountains and aware of our presence in that moment. We feel both utterly connected to the larger story and at the same time we are acutely aware that we are a small part of that story.

As I stretched my sense of time this week in my deep dive into orogeny, it made me think about the different senses of time that come with our faith. Theologians borrow terms from ancient Greek and speak of kairos time and chronos time. Chronos, from the same word we get chronological, is the minute after minute, hour after hour, year after year sense of time moving forward. Kairos time exists alongside chronos, but is a more generative, more broad, more integrated sense of time. We can look at kairos time as God's time: the sense we get from the gospel that there is a bigger, ongoing story of God with us and God within the world is kairos time. Every day we hold in tension the sense that we are called to particular places, people, and actions, and also the sense that we are just one part in a story that is much bigger than any of us individually. It's like standing on a mountain made of rocks that formed billions of years ago and being thankful for that particular moment.

It is fitting that today's gospel story takes place on a mountain. In many different human traditions, mountains seem to have special spiritual status and we see that here. We can remember back to other symbolic mountaintop moments that this one is calling back to, one of which is in our reading from Exodus. The tradition goes that when God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Moses received the law from God on Mount Sinai. God's presence was visible in the form of a dense cloud with devouring fire at the top of the mountain, there for all of the people to see. I imagine it was both astonishing and terrifying, glorious in the full sense of the word. Last week we read about the law being given so that we can choose life over destruction, flourishing for all rather than marginalizing some. It is no wonder that an invitation as earth-shaking and cosmos-shaping as this one would be framed in such vivid, mystical terms.

When the writer of Matthew brings us to the Transfiguration, we should be thinking back to the story in Exodus, with our spiritual senses telling us that something might be about to happen. Sure enough, the three disciples that go with Jesus have a mystical experience in which they see Jesus physically shining and embodying the presence and glory of God. Not only that, but they also see Moses and Elijah with Jesus, a connection back to the tradition of Moses as the recipient of the law and Elijah as one of God's prophets. The disciples hear another confirmation of Jesus as God's beloved, echoing the story of Jesus' baptism.

This mountaintop moment comes right as the gospel story in Matthew is about to take a turn. Just before this passage, Jesus tells the disciples for the first time that, soon, he will suffer and die at the hands of the authorities, but that he would be resurrected after three days. Jesus' followers are understandably confused and stressed by this news, and Peter even tries to correct Jesus. It is in the context of this confusing, distressing foretelling that the Transfiguration takes place.

Jesus brings the three to a mountaintop just before they will descend into a spiritual valley that ends in Jesus' mocking and death. This moment showing the mystical intensity and physical reality of the presence of God in the person of Jesus is meant to fuel them for the journey that lies ahead, filled with deep descents.

Jesus did not only foretell his death, though, he also revealed that death would not be the end of the story. He is asking his followers, including us, to choose life even knowing that we will face the realities of grief and death. In confronting the Transfiguration we are reminded that we are asked to do two things at the same time. The first is to be present to the glory and mystery happening right in front of us.

At the same time, we are asked to remember that alongside everything happening in the moment, God's salvation story is much more broad than we can ever truly comprehend. While chronos time ticks by, we also live in God's kairos time. On that mountain the disciples were asked to hold this tension and use it to move through the journey toward the cross. They were asked to see Jesus as part of God's long, unfolding liberation story even though they would also be present for Jesus' death. Holding this tension is what makes us people who are about resurrection. We are witnesses to what is going on, the joy, the glory, the struggle, the peace, and can still remember that there is a broader story written by God's love and justice.