

Down from the Mountain

Quinquagesima A, 2/19/23

What is it about God and mountains? What is it about God, mountains, and being coy about what goes on up there? *Don't tell anyone about what you saw or whom, not till 3rd-person me is raised from the dead*, said Jesus to his followers; *I mean it. Everybody*, said Moses, *Wait here with Aaron, and don't worry. I'm going up. I'll be back a month or so*. He might've added, *Yeah, I see the fire, but that's alright. This all started with a burning bush anyway*. What are these people supposed to do in the meantime? Only the Shadow knows, as far as I can tell – as the night prayer goes, to that same Lord, 'hide me under the shadow of your wing.'

"The world is charged," wrote Hopkins, "with the grandeur of God," in all possible meanings of the word "charged." You bet it is – charged like a battery, a defibrillator, or a debt you think you can pay off but never can. Just ask everyone in the Bible who really mattered. "Our God is a consuming fire," says the Book of Deuteronomy, and the Book of Hebrews, "even" in the former "a jealous God," who will have no others before Him. Most of the other imagery continues in that vein, even if not always at that temperature. "Where were you when I made the land, the sea, and whirlwind, and that Leviathan just for the sport of it?" Indeed, indeed. As Blake famously, if in terror, asked if "The Tyger," "Did He who made the lamb make thee?"

Today's lessons are about nothing so much as the power of God, and how that power makes itself known. This is a bit of a switch from what we've been hearing, however. Was it not only last week that the true gentle Jesus meek and mild, the son of Sirach and author of the book by that name, told us that the Lord had said, "I have set

before you fire and water; choose wisely”? Clearly, a choice was made by the Lord in other places about how and as what to appear, and He did not choose water – at least, not right away. Cloud by day, fire by night, one if by land, two if by sea. Where our God is, there is light, and there is flame. Did not even his Son’s disciples hearts blaze when they heard him speak, shining, at Emmaus after his resurrection? How much more the Father than the Son.

True, by the time of the Gospel of John, we learn that the third person of that Trinity, the Holy Spirit, comes forth in, or perhaps as, “living waters,” which is a step up from simply “having moved” over them at the beginning of creation. How one can be in both that and Pentecost’s tongues of fire remains a matter of theological speculation. Perhaps God in three person, blessed, is nothing so much as an electrical or a grease fire, the adding of water to which only makes it worse. Yet we should note that Jeremiah foreshadowed this water imagery to a degree. In his book’s chapter 17 we learn that the Lord is “the fountain of living waters,” which sounds both positive and, on its own, inflammable. However, if we say that we must also say that earlier in that chapter the Lord tells the prophet that the people of Israel have “kindled a fire in mine anger which shall burn forever,” making the Holy Spirit somewhat more like Sacred Steam, or that pit of coal that shall burn for another 250 years under Centralia, PA. (“To Carthage then I came / burning burning burning burning.”) When you are an omnipotent being, when you can be anything you want, why be that?

Who I am even to ask, you ask? And well you should. After, all, “Your ways not my ways,” says the Lord. I must say, I have to agree; you, Lord, get to live in heaven; we must live on earth. How could our ways be the same, or even in harmony? Yet the choice you gave the son of Sirach remains before us: fire and water. I know which one I’d choose. Some years ago I came across a saying, I have no memory of from or

by whom, that goes, “Be a lion. I will still be water.” I love that saying don’t you? It says it all. If me and my house were ever ennobled, I think I’d ask to have that made my motto, and not give a whit were the very lion of Judah to roar against me. But let us get back to God.

You see, sometimes the Lord tones the fire down a little, becoming what the prophet Malachi calls “a refiner’s fire.” Fine, fine; we could all do with a little less dross and little more gold shining through. Yet, as the LDS church helpfully notes, “the refiner’s fire is not a pleasant place to be. It involves intense heat and repeated hammering,” even if, according to them and many of my clerical colleagues, through it “we are purified and prepared to meet God,” much as a sword or an axe is presented to the weapons-master, or an I-beam to the welders.¹ It would appear that beatings will continue, repeatedly, until spirituality improves – hammerings, even – and after that, it gets even better. When not in a refining mood, this consuming fire of a God is just napalm, or an H-bomb. Here’s looking at you, Sodom, Gomorrah – except He said not to do that, not unless you want to be turned like the mother of Lot’s benighted daughters into a pillar of salt for looking back on all she’d lost – or, in some version of the story, a stack of blasted ash. Friends of mine touring in Egypt just sent me a video of these sorts of things, pillars of salt or rock or something nor sea nor sky had worn away yet, not for lack of trying. I have to tell you, looking at them standing there on some of the land God gave to Cain, I was terrified, as were they – and they were seeing these things in the rain.

So all this talk about God and mountains is really talk about God and fire, or God as fire, as light, heat, shining forth and blazing forth as on a cloudless noonday, or as garments purified till they glow from within. For fire read energy, as Blake taught us, power released, focused and wild, the sort of thing we can’t live without nor live

¹ Source: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2014-11-0010-the-refiners-fire?lang=eng> .

easily with, yet of which we know: when it's gone, it's gone. It is no more, it has moved on, but as it did so it has changed everything. I can see, I guess, why you might not want to tell everybody just how much, not until they were ready. Every time someone comes down from a mountain atop which God was blazing one way or another, after all, things get a little dicey. Just ask Peter, or Aaron. But go up they had to, and come down they had to, bring a little of that fire back down to earth, see what or whom they can set ablaze either in passion for the works and will of the Lord, or to be consumed by them until nothing's left but a memory. It could be laws to live by, as it was with Moses and the tablets. It could be hopes to live by, as it was with Peter, James, and John. It could be what it was for all of them: truths to live by, to live in, and to live for. These are truths about what life means, what it's for, why the Lord that made all this – all this, the world around us and the one that comes next – went to the trouble of doing so, set us free to do as we liked with it, and then came back to set us free again of the mess we'd made when we did just that.

To be able to come down from any mountain one has to be willing and able to first to up it, which I guess is one lesson from today's readings that we often forget. Peter, James, and John had no idea what awaited them when Jesus had them put down whatever they were doing and follow him up the mountain, leaving everyone else behind. They had to have known that it would be something special, though, or at least suspected. Moses, for his part, knew what he was walking into, if not the fact that he'd spent forty days in the thick of it, the same length of time given to Noah to sail the trackless seas of a flooded world, awaiting further instruction. It's the same length of time as Jesus' temptation – long enough to forget everything you ever knew, if you're thirsty and hungry enough, which you will be if you get yourself caught in this sort of thing. Forty days before today would be, if I did my maths right, January 10th. Could you have stood on a mountain top with a God who was fire for all that time while that God carved stones with his law upon them? Could you have

gone since then without food or water, even though you had the power to make these things appear at will? I know I could not. Yet maybe that's how long it takes to really take it in, the God who Is and what that God wants of us and for us.

It may not take forty days. Jesus, James, John, and Peter were at the Transfiguration for much less time than that. But they were there – present, attentive, and overwhelmed, even more than Moses during his month and a half. They wanted to capture the moment, and who can blame them? But that wasn't the point. They weren't to hold onto this blazing light of a savior and his heavenly friends to keep them for themselves. They were to let them go and be changed by having seen them, listened to them, understood in a new way that “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” They were then to share that message with others, dimming it only enough that people could understand it, be inspired by it, change because of it, and rekindle the fire within themselves that may have died, or been doused, by the world that is.

Alleluia, we say to that – Praise the Lord. Say it again if you want – Alleluia! We have to get them out now, since on Wednesday Lent begins, and what the angels sing in perpetuity before the throne is not to issue from our lips for another, you guessed it, forty days. We bank the fires of our praise for God, as it were, for that season, all the better to remember at Easter why we rejoice, and why we sing God's praises in the first place. We may know God as a refiner's fire, or as a consuming fire. I hope most of all we know God as the name at the heart of that fire: love. For whatever else God is, God is love. Those who came down from the mountains where they met him knew that most of all, and in their own ways made it known. That is good news, indeed. Alleluia, and Amen.