

With Eyes and Ears Anew
 Exodus 24:12-18
 Matthew 17:1-9
 Transfiguration Sunday
 March 6, 2011
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

This is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season of light. Next week we start Lent, the dark, introspective season of penitence and prayer. But the scripture readings today are about the glory of God! Moses waited on the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day God appeared like a "devouring fire on the top of the mountain." And then in the story in Matthew you hear the same imagery. "Six days later" Jesus, like Moses, goes up to the mountain. And Peter and James and John see Jesus, shining "like the sun," in clothes "dazzling white." And there on the mountain, God's voice echoes out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Where have we heard those words before? At Jesus' baptism. There is a great deal of repetition in the Bible. It is because the whole Bible is about the human encounter with God, which is not a one-time occurrence. In every time throughout history, people have opened their eyes and seen a manifestation of God, and they have opened their ears and heard what they've called the voice of the Almighty.

When people speak of the heights of human emotion, we refer to such times as "mountain-top experiences." Around the world, through all the ages, ancient people have imagined the gods residing high up in the sky. Greek mythology pictured the gods on Mt. Olympus. The Hindu people looked to Mount Meru, the mountain where the Lord of all the deities, Lord Brahma, lived. Before Buddhism came to Tibet, the people of Tibet believed in 9 creator-gods, who each lived on the top of a mountain http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/16ii/Xie_jisheng.pdf. The Hebrew people envisioned their *one* God at the top of Mt. Sinai, where Moses received from God the tablets with the Ten Commandments.

Because we seek a relationship with the divine, (it seems to be a universal human need) we want to have "mountain-top" experiences. We want to be "carried away," lifted above the everyday, mundane routine of life. We want to be transposed to a place of God. We want to see a vision of God with light and hope, and we want to hear the voice of God, saying, "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased." We want God to be visible and audible. We call this experience transcendence, this connecting with the divine. When Moses and Elijah appeared before Peter, James, and John, and Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in a new way. They identified him with Moses and the Law, and Elijah and the Prophets. They heard God's voice from out of the cloud and knew that everything had changed. This mountaintop moment told them that Jesus was both human and divine.

Some of us find our "mountain-top moments" in nature. You may have climbed Mt. Tamalpais nearby in Marin, or Half Dome in Yosemite. It may have been for recreation. But

think about that word, "re-creation." In the hike up the mountain, or the walk along the creek, we seek the experience of transcendence, and, in that, we find re-creation. We find that in God's presence we are created anew.

One of my favorite books is *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. It's the story of two fathers and two sons, set in South Africa in the eastern mountainous region of the country. An Anglican priest, Stephen Kumalo, a black man, raised his son, Absalom, in the poor village of Ndotsheni. On a hillside, overlooking the village, lived James Jarvis, a wealthy landowner, a white man, and his son, Arthur. Both sons went to live in Johannesburg as adults. Arthur became a lawyer and tried to change some of the inequities of life in segregated South Africa of the 1940s. Absalom fell into a life of crime. The black father goes to Johannesburg to find his son, and learns that, when robbing a house, Absalom has accidentally killed a white man, in fact it is the white lawyer who was trying to help black people, the son of his neighbor in Ndotsheni. The two fathers mourn the death of one son and the imminent execution of the other son. On the day before Absalom is to be hanged, Stephen Kumalo goes up the mountain outside his village. He climbs up to be alone with God. He climbs bent over in anguish, in shame, and in deep sorrow. At the top, he rests and prays. Then he takes out his corn cake and tea. He blesses the bread, breaks it, and eats it. Then he takes the cup, gives thanks, and drinks from it. He sleeps that night on the mountain. And when he wakes up with the sunrise, he knows that his son has been executed for his crime, and the new day has begun.

It is not a joyous, happy mountaintop experience. But it is a holy communion with God. A time of asking for forgiveness and for watching the rise of sunlight again into the old man's dark life. Stephen Kumalo walks back down into his village standing straighter, looking forward.

After September 11, people gathered together all over the country to hear music and to find healing and light in the darkness. Jim and I attended a memorial concert performed in Berkeley. The conductor asked at the beginning of the performance that the audience not applaud, but leave at the end of the piece in silence. The majesty of the music that day overpowered us. It was like it descended upon us from out of the clouds. We were strangers brought together in solidarity in our grief. Somehow we had come to hear that we were not alone. We came to hear expression of our anger, our confusion, and our fear in the chords of the music. We needed the strength of something beyond ourselves that day. The music washed over us like a storm of rain and then a ray of sunshine. The audience of some 800 people walked out of the concert hall in silence, stunned, transformed. You could say we had heard the voice of God: "You are my beloved. I am with you in your sorrow."

That's what music does. It brings to us the voice of God. In nature, on a mountaintop, we see God, and in music we hear God.

Sometimes the music comes on the wings of an angel messenger. I think that is what happened when Muza came to be our pianist 17 years ago. For her, St. John's became a second home. She was fresh from the Republic of Georgia, attending the San Francisco

Conservatory, and this was her first job in America. Muza made St. John's her practice studio late at night, just Muza alone making beautiful music. I know that music is the way Muza experiences God, and we thank her for helping us to connect with God each week in such a profound way through her music.

I pray that this Lent you will experience God perhaps in long walks up a mountain, along a beach, or through a park. I hope you will attend church where we will hear contemplative and soul-searching music during Lent. Lori Sikorski will be our interim pianist. And I hope you will allow yourself to see with new eyes and hear with new ears the glory of God.