

From Ephesians: God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places... he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things.

I was at Starbucks the other day and was talking with one of the baristas. I have talked to her on numerous occasions, and a week or so ago, her best friend's mother died. I have been praying for them. You have been, too, in the Prayers of the People, whether you knew it or not! I saw her Friday and asked her how things were. *Difficult*, she said, but there was some relief. This weekend, they were going to New Hampshire. *God lives in the mountains*, she said. *She was hoping to find God there.*

She isn't the first to imagine that God lives in the mountains, is she? That seems to be common to much of humanity. The Old Testament often imagined God that way. God lived on high, to say it more exactly. God would come and interact, of course, in the Garden in the cool of the afternoon, seeking out people to call his own: like Abraham and Jacob. It was the story of Moses, how he went up the holy mountain of Sinai to receive the Law. He

was up there so long he got sunburned, scripture says, so involved was his mountaintop encounter. And the prophet Elijah, when his time was completed, led his companion Elisha out, and while he was blessing him, Elijah was carried up into heaven in the famous Chariots of fire. *God dwelt on high.*

This suggestion even makes its way into the NT. You remember the story of the Transfiguration, how Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and they went up another holy mountain, and there they beheld his glory. In fact, even Moses and Elijah show up again, if only to reinforce the imagery. It must have been quite the experience. Peter thought they should remain. He wanted to build tents there and stay, but Jesus said no. This time it was a preparation for their Journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. That is what the gospels tell us, that when they had come down, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, toward another mountain called Golgotha. When he was high and lifted up, he would draw the world to himself. That was the holy mountain that would change the world forever.

I suspect that all of this has come together for us, too, in the past few months. It was with the story of the Transfiguration that we, like Jesus, began this journey to Jerusalem. That was our gospel the Sunday before Lent began. And then Lent and Easter led us onward: to that holy mountain of Calvary, and then beyond it.

And now in these final days of Easter we come to another holy mountain. It was probably the Mount of Olives, in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. That is where the church has always marked the Ascension of Christ. And as Luke tells the story, it was just like all those other mountaintop experiences.

Moses and Elijah show up again, this time not so literally but implicitly. Notice how our gospel begins: These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you. If you turn back to the Old Testament, you will notice this is how Moses' final address to his people in Deuteronomy begins. These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel. And then he is mentioned by name. I think Luke

imagined that Moses was on this holy mountain, too. Same for Elijah: he is there too, implicitly. He took Elisha out with him, and crossed a river, and while he was blessing him, he was taken away. And Elisha was left with his mantle and a double portion of his Spirit. The scholarly word for this is intertextuality, how the New Testament relies on an image from the Old Testament to help it make sense of these subtle connections. And that seems true of the story of Christ's ascension. It relies on Moses and Elijah and the Law and the Prophets, to make sense of what is going on at this, the final holy mountain.

So it happens. This story takes its place along those other mountaintop encounters. Christ withdraws from them, and they return down the holy mountain to worship and to work, and in that, Luke's gospel tells us, they are filled with joy.

Since this is the final holy mountain, it seems to me that we could pause for just a minute and see, almost like Luke did when he wove Moses and Elijah into the story, how more is going on than simply meets the eye. The

word had once become flesh, John's gospel says, and we beheld his glory. And then in the end, the flesh became Word. Think about that for a minute. He lived among us, full of grace and truth, and he led us up holy mountains in order to know God and that we might be known by God. And he taught us how to love relentlessly. They nailed him to a tree, but God raised him from the dead. And then finally, Christ led his disciples up one last mountain. There the flesh that was born and crucified and finally raised from the dead, baring those dear tokens of his passion, finally ascended. *In the beginning the Word became Flesh. And in the end, the flesh became Word.*

All of this was for a reason. If you have ever pondered the Incarnation, as wonderful as it was, perhaps you have thought it must have seemed a bit limiting for God. God's nature is not to be limited but to be unleashed. And so it was for Christ. He could be limited no longer to a single place or time. This is what I think Ephesians means when it says that God raised him from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places. It is what the Prayer Book means when it says that Christ ascended so that he might fill all

things. He would no longer be bound to Palestine so many centuries ago. No, he comes to claim the here and now. And he claims us. I think this is what Ephesians means when it hopes that we might have our hearts enlightened to know the hope to which he has called us.

This pattern of lifting up in order to fill all things—of having our hearts enlightened—ought to be familiar to us. It is, of course, what we do each time we worship. We begin the Eucharistic Prayer with those ancient words of *Sursem Corda*, praying that our hearts might be lifted to the Lord, that we might be raised to where he is. And then he is manifested again in bread and wine. And finally we are sent to be his people. *To love and serve the Lord.* The lifting is not an end unto itself. Being raised with Christ is not an end unto itself. No, Luke says that on that final holy mountain, after he ascended, they worshipped him, and then they returned down the mountain with great joy. Down the mountain was where his will for them lived. I suspect that is supposed to be true of us, too.

I came across a wonderful story this week. It was about a young woman who traveled to India years ago to learn from Mother Teresa. She believed that Mother Teresa was transforming the world like no other, so she went to learn from her. But when she got there, they told her that Mother Teresa had been called away and would be gone during her time in India. So they would need her to use her time wisely. She would cook for the poor, wash dishes, clean, and bandage the wounded who came to them. And so she did, day after day.

Finally she grew tired of it all. She had come to learn from Mother Teresa, not just to do these menial tasks. So finally she presented herself to the woman in charge, and she protested. She reminded her how she had come to learn from Mother Teresa, and all that she was doing was cooking and cleaning and bandaging, not exactly changing the world. And the nun, a meek woman, smiled at her. She said that they gave the young woman the job that Mother Teresa did every day when she was there.

In the beginning, the Word became flesh, and dwelt with us, and we beheld his glory. In the end, the flesh became Word, so that he might fill all things. And to him we lift our hearts. And from his holy mountain we go, always, to love and serve the Lord.