

On The Precipice: Two Scriptures, Three Lessons

Exodus 24:9-18; Mark 9:2-8

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You know how there are certain books that are not only well-written but also have a tremendous impact on your life? You read them and you just know, from cover to cover, that this is a plot that you will learn something significant from, that these are characters you will continue to think about after you're done reading, and that you will be a different person (and, you like to think, a better person) because you read this book.

One of those books for me is the 1982 classic *Grover Goes To School*.

You may not be familiar with this book, although surely you're familiar with Grover, the loveable and cuddly blue monster Muppet from Sesame Street. Grover is one of Jim Henson's most endearing Muppets. He always wants to do right by others, even though he usually comes up short because he makes some very understandable mistake, and then he immediately feels extreme remorse for his shortcomings, invoking deep pathos for all who are following his plight through the pages or the TV screen. He is at least as good a protagonist as Oliver Twist.

Anyway, in *Grover Goes To School*, Grover is preparing for his first day of school. He is excited but nervous. He has new crayons and a specially-made lunch. He wants to be helpful. He wants to make friends.

The morning goes disastrously. Grover misses out on snacktime, fails to find anyone who will join him in his favorite game of jacks, and worst of all gets swindled out of his new crayons and his jelly sandwich by this twerp named Truman. Grover is trying so hard to do right by everyone else that he ends up doing himself wrong. Luckily, he eventually turns things around—he makes friends, they play jacks, and he ends the day on a high note. But it is the devastating beginning that sticks with people. Ask anyone who read *Grover Goes To School* as a child, and you're virtually guaranteed to get an agitated response that expresses sympathy for Grover and disgust for Truman.

We get agitated because—just like Grover and just like a bunch of Wake County students this week—we have all had that extremely nervous first-day-of-school experience. We have it in kindergarten, in middle school, in high school, in college, at the first day of camp, on the first day of work, meeting new people at a party, and maybe even in a place like church. Beginnings are hard, even when you're excited. Sometimes there is someone waiting to swindle you out of your jelly sandwich. No matter what, beginnings never go as you expect.

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I'm not totally convinced of this argument, but I think that both of the scripture readings today are "first day of school moments," stories about people who are on the precipice of a new relationship or experience. They have encountered just enough to be excited, but they are still unsure. They don't know for certain how things are going to play out, and they are likely going to experience something that they didn't expect to run into.

When we last saw our Israelite heroes, they were being invited into a covenant with an impressive God that appeared to them in a cloud of thunder and fire. They were invited, but they were held at bay, required to commit to this covenant while not being allowed to ascend the mountain before them. Since that initial (literally) earth-shaking moment, Moses has made numerous trips up and down Sinai, returning with commandments and other directives for the Israelites, but they do not really know what is happening on the mountain. Not yet.

In the gospel reading this morning, Peter, James, and John find themselves in a similar situation. They too have been going about their business with Jesus, listening to him teach and watching as he performs miracles. Peter (and perhaps others) believes that Jesus is the Messiah, having asserted so in the previous chapter, but their lives haven't been that different from the lives of disciples of other itinerant rabbis like John the Baptist. Jesus invites them to climb with him, but they, too, do not really know what is happening on the mountain. Not yet.

Both groups, the Israelites and the disciples, have made a commitment without knowing what they are really committing to. To help them understand what they're committing to, Moses and Jesus bring them up a mountain where the divinity, majesty, and power of God bursts forth upon them. And both groups—again, both the Israelites and the disciples—react in the same way. They are utterly flummoxed.

This is a shame, because there is potential here for some great description. Humanity has been interacting with God for centuries at this point, but every story makes it clear that God has not been fully revealed to the humans. Humans do not come too close to God, they do not tread on God's sacreddest of spaces, they do not look at God directly. This is the case almost from the beginning of Genesis, and it is certainly the case throughout these Sinai stories in Exodus. They do not expect or dare to know God as they are about to know God.

Peter, James & John, of course, have been interacting with Jesus...but they've been interacting with him as a human, calling him "teacher" and not "God." They, too, are not expecting to see Jesus as a shining deity.

So, when the Israelites arrive on Mount Sinai and see the God of Israel, they are dumbfounded. We are told twice that they gaze upon God, taking God in with their eyes, and yet these priests say nothing throughout this entire passage. Likewise, when Jesus is transfigured, his closest disciples are struck silent. Even Peter, who manages a feeble suggestion, "does not know what to say, for they were terrified."¹ When Peter, of all people, goes mute, it is noteworthy.

The onlookers are so paralyzed by these encounters that they can't even really tell us what it was like. The Exodus passage includes a few surreal details—feet on a shining blue path and a meal shared. The Markan passage has Jesus in white clothes, guest appearances from Moses and Elijah, and a voice from a cloud...but we don't know how any of these changes happened or how the miraculous appearances ceased to be. Both episodes happen without resulting in a clear description of what God looks like, and while God may not want humanity to have a record of that description, the lack of detail mostly serves for us to understand just how baffled the human beings in each of these stories are.

¹ Mark 9:6

It's not entirely fair to depict the Israelites and the disciples as completely paralyzed. In Exodus, the scripture goes out of its way to include the fact that the Israelites share a meal...apparently with God. That part of the story is a paradox unto itself: it's small enough to be easily overlooked but so bizarre that no one could ever miss it. It's really hard to imagine Yahweh eating, so the fact that this is included in this scripture seems particularly important.

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The first summer I spent in ministry was at Hayes Barton Baptist across town. There was a man on staff there named Wilton, a large man with a deep drawl who oversaw all of the different building projects and improvements that the church undertook. If you wanted to make something big happen at that church, Wilton was your best bet.

I was only there ten weeks and didn't need to make anything big happen, but I did want to get to know Wilton, and I asked him if we might spend some time together. He invited me to join him one morning for his daily breakfast at Finch's Diner under Capital Boulevard. We met at the church, he drove me to the diner, and as we walked in it was close to the reception that Norm received on *Cheers*. They never brought him a menu, just a plate of food soon after we sat down.

I had breakfast with Wilton several times that summer, and even though I can't tell you a single thing we talked about, I know that the time spent together really mattered...and I know that part of why it mattered is because we were eating together, and there is an innate bond formed through sharing a meal.

The Israelites eating on Mt. Sinai are partaking in a significant meal—much like the Passover meal that took place earlier in Exodus or the supper in the upper room that Jesus will share with his disciples many years later. The Sinai meal is one that suggests that something important is happening. This is a covenant meal.

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The disciples atop Mt. Tabor with Jesus do not share in a meal, but the significance of their experience is marked by another clear sign, the attempt that Peter makes to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It is an awkward suggestion, one that reveals just how little Peter understands what is happening. There are only a few even half-decent reasons for building these shelters, and most of them have to do with expecting Jesus, Moses and Elijah to remain on the mountain, which they will not.

But the fact that Peter hopes that they will, or wants to make this experience more permanent and less fleeting, suggests that he does grasp the significance of what is happening even if he can't respond to it appropriately.

If you have ever taken part in a Habitat for Humanity project, you know two things:

- 1) When we build shelters—build anything—with other people, we are connected with them at a level that we can't truly explain or grasp. We become united with people that we sweat and create with. It is a bond similar to covenant in the way that it draws together while transcending logic.

- 2) We build shelters because they are needed but also because they are expressions of who we are. Our homes, offices, schools, and churches reflect our values and priorities. They speak for us...which means that the choices we make to construct them require us to open up in the same way that sharing a meal with someone requires of us.

Peter's suggestion to build these structures may be misguided, but it comes from the same place as the Israelites' shared meal with God on Sinai thousands of years earlier. It comes from a place of acknowledging the depth and value of the relationships on that mountain.

Within each of these stories, we may not have all of the details that we'd like, settling instead for dreamlike descriptions, but we can be certain that each are about people standing on the precipice of an important relationship forming, the relationship of covenant, a relationship that requires commitment without a lot of clarity, without knowing how things will play out.

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If you have been worshipping with us regularly for the past month or so, you've heard me present numerous theories about why we come to church based on why various biblical characters approach a mountain. In the two stories we read today, there are at least three shared lessons worth noting, three reasons why the characters go up the mountain, three metaphors that we can apply to the church.

The first is that these biblical characters come to the mountain **unsure but hopeful**, allowing themselves to experience God in a way that leaves them speechless but appreciative. We are not particularly good at approaching things with unsureness. We want to know all of the details in advance—who's going to be there, what's going to be talked about, is this really worth my time? The internet and our phones have maybe made it a little too easy to do research, have perhaps cultured us to expect more answers than we have earned.

It seems noteworthy to me that the Israelites don't harangue Moses with a ton of questions before climbing Sinai. It seems even more momentous that the disciples, especially Peter, don't pepper Jesus with questions on the trip up Mt. Tabor. They lean into their uncertainty...and then they are overwhelmed with a phenomenal encounter with God when they get to the top. Our experience with church should be similar: we climb the mountain in front of us without knowing the exact path that it will command, and we do this trusting that the experience will be gloriously flabbergasting in some way...even if we can't predict how.

The second lesson is that, when they are overwhelmed by God in these experiences, the Israelites and the disciples both seek to respond not with a proliferation of words but rather with actions that cement the power of the relationship. The food shared, the desire to build—these are ways of emphasizing that the relationship forged between God and humanity on these mountaintops is real, is honest, is genuine, is deep.

We come to church seeking covenant relationship with God and with each other. We don't get to dictate what those relationships will look like, but when they happen, we should be both mesmerized by their beauty and passionate about extending that beauty beyond the initial moment.

We saw hints of much of this in the scripture last week. As the Israelites are approaching Sinai, six Exodus chapters ago, we saw the initial glimpses of the need to be honest, open, committed, and deep. In many ways, the Old Testament passage today is a fulfillment of last week's intro; the gospel passage today is an extension of the experiences that occurred on Mt. Sinai, a presentation of the same ideals viewed through the lens of Jesus.

The third lesson, however, is new this week. The third lesson is the culmination of the establishing of the covenant, the end of the beginning. And the third lesson is this: after an experience like the ones atop Mt. Sinai and Mt. Tabor, things will never be the same again.

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There's an idea throughout the Old Testament, reflected in these verses from Exodus, that "no one can see God and live." Part of why the author repeats that these Israelites did see God and survived is that, according to tradition, that shouldn't have been possible. Making sense of this requires a different understanding of that maxim, a new interpretation.

Episcopal priest Martin Smith suggests that a better expression of those words might be "No one could see God and remain unchanged."² A direct encounter with God is so phenomenally life-altering that it ends the old life and begins a new one. The Israelites, after this chapter, will forever be the Nation of God. They'll still have their ups and downs, but they are forever changed. Moses, who will continue to go up and down the mountain for the next several chapters, will eventually end up interacting with God so much that his face will glow enduringly.³ And Peter, James, and John, after their experience with Jesus, will find themselves in leadership roles that the other disciples don't pursue.⁴ This story is called "the transfiguration of Jesus" because Jesus' outward appearance changes, but the transformative impact on the three disciples is longer-lasting and affects their inner selves.

We do not enter into covenant—not with God, not with each other—and expect to remain the same. Our relationships inevitably transform us; our covenant relationships inevitably transform us the most. We expect to change.

We don't always want to be changed. It is a scary proposition, knowing that who we are isn't always who we will be.

Ultimately, we're left only to choose our covenant relationships carefully—not to know exactly how things will turn out but instead to know exactly who we're excited about covenanting with, exactly what we're willing to risk, and exactly who we are, even if that is something malleable.

It is what we do on the first day of school, standing on the precipice unsure but hopeful, ready to form the bonds that will shape us going forward.

² Qtd. by Walter Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 1, 883.

³ Exodus 34:29-35.

⁴ <https://www.crossroadsonline.org/crc-blog/three-disciples>