

Holy Mountains. In our four lessons this morning we heard about three different holy mountains. Three mountains that were places of awe and wonder. Mountains with fire; clouds; light; lightning; fear; trembling; shaking.

The first mountain is Mt. Sinai. When Moses is on the mountaintop God appears on Mt. Sinai in a cloud, a cloud which also glows like a devouring fire. The glory of the Lord is hidden in this fiery cloud, too awesome for the people to witness. Just a few chapters earlier in Exodus, the appearance of God on the mountain was accompanied by lightning and thunder and earthquake, and the people in the camp below trembled.

Only Moses is allowed to approach God. And Moses can only see God in the cloud. In Jewish terminology, the cloud is called the Shekinah. The glowing cloud, the Shekinah both manifests God's glory, and also hides and shields people from the sight of God. For the sight of God is too awesome for humans to witness directly. The sight of God is too much even for Moses. A few chapters later, God will let Moses see him. But God only lets Moses have a glimpse of his back side, for if Moses sees God plainly, face to face, he would not survive.

God's appearing to Moses took place on the mountain. On Mt. Sinai, God gives Moses the Law, the Ten Commandments. And immediately after this morning's reading, God gives Moses some detailed instructions. God tells Moses to build a tabernacle, a portable tent, a portable temple. That tabernacle, that temple/tent is to be taken with the people as they wander through the wilderness. In the inner chamber of the tent, in the Holy of Holies, the people are to place the tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments. They are to put the Ten Commandments into a box, in the Ark of the Covenant.

If you've seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, this is that ark, the Ark of the Covenant. And above the ark, on the lid, there are statues of two angels, two cherubim with outstretched wings. And over the tips of the wings of the cherubim, over what is called the Mercy Seat, God promises to be present.

God's glory, God's Shekinah, will be present in the Holy of Holies. And the Mercy Seat will serve as God's Throne, and the Ark of the Covenant itself will serve as God's footstool. God will be present; God will be enthroned in the Tabernacle.

And by telling the people to construct the Tabernacle, this portable temple-tent, God gives them a way to keep his presence with them throughout their travels. They don't have to stay at Mt. Sinai to worship him.

Other peoples at that time had gods who were restricted to certain locations. Other gods were restricted to a certain mountain or a certain temple. But the God of Israel could and would travel with his people wherever they go. This way, God could be in his tent wherever his people set up their tents. God's presence would be in the midst of his people.

Hundreds of years later, a permanent temple would be built on another mountain, a second holy mountain. The Jewish temple was built on Mt. Moriah, in Zion, in the city of Jerusalem. The temple would have the same general floor-plan as the tabernacle. The temple

would have an inner chamber, a Holy of Holies, where they would place the same Ark of the Covenant. In the Holy of Holies in the Temple, God's presence would hover over the Mercy Seat, over the cherubim on the top of the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark itself would be God's footstool. Our Psalm this morning speaks of God's presence in the Temple:

1 The LORD is King; let the people tremble; he is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake.

2 The LORD is great in Zion; he is high above all peoples.

3 Let them confess his Name, which is great and awesome; he is the Holy One.

5 Proclaim the greatness of the LORD our God and fall down before his footstool; he is the Holy One.

Like the Tabernacle, the Temple is a place where God could be present with his people. Since they were settled, since they were no longer nomadic shepherds, God's presence was no longer in a tent. Instead, it was in a building in the capital city of Jerusalem. But the symbolism was the same, God's presence was there in the midst of his people, and his presence was stunning.

God was present both in the tent of the Tabernacle and in the Temple building. In the Tabernacle and the Temple, God was in the midst of his people. And yet, God was unapproachable. God, though near, was also distant.

And there was only one man amongst the Jewish people who was allowed to set foot in the Holy of Holies. Only one man could approach the presence of God. That man was the High Priest. And he could only stand in the presence of God on one occasion per year, on the Day of Atonement, on Yom Kippur. And when the High Priest went behind the thick curtain into the Holy of Holies, he would walk in with a rope tied around his ankle. That way, in case he was overwhelmed by God's presence and died, the other priests could drag him back out, without entering the Holy of Holies themselves.

The rest of the year, God was unapproachable, hidden away behind the veil of the temple. God was to be worshipped from a distance, for the presence of God was too awesome and too dangerous for human beings to endure.

Both our Psalm and our OT lesson from Exodus provide a wonderful description of the absolute power and majesty and transcendence of God. On Mt. Sinai, and on the Temple Mount, God's presence, God's glory, God's Shekinah is overwhelming.

Yet, today, we also read about a third mountain. A nameless mountain. A high mountain. A regular mountain that becomes a holy mountain. Our Gospel reading says, "Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves." Jesus went up the mountain with his inner circle. And there, they witness something marvelous. "(Jesus) was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white, (and) suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him."

What an amazing sight. Jesus shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white and bright. The disciples get a glimpse of the divine side of Jesus. They'd seen the human side, but now, they get to see his divine side as well, a side that wouldn't be visible again until after his resurrection.

And as if this wasn't enough, they saw Moses and Elijah with him, the two men who represented the Jewish religion, the Law and the Prophets.

And as if this wasn't enough, a cloud overshadowed them, the presence of God in the cloud overshadowed them, and they heard a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

What an amazing, awesome, overpowering event, as glorious and as awesome as God's appearance on Mt. Sinai, or as God's presence in the Tabernacle and Temple.

And the disciples have two very natural reactions. For one thing, they fall to the ground and are overcome by fear. They were terrified. Who among us wouldn't have also been terrified? After all, they were good Jews, they knew that no one was allowed to see God. No one, except the High Priest was allowed to stand in God's presence. On top of that, their teacher is glowing and he's talking to the two most important men in the OT. Who wouldn't be terrified?

But they have another reaction as well. Peter says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter says, 'Let's preserve the moment. Let's set up three dwellings, three booths, literally three tabernacles, one for each of you. Let's keep your presence here on the mountain. Let's contain your presence safely where we can deal with it.' This is another wonderful, typical human reaction. Let's preserve things. Let's keep things comfortable. Let's enjoy this time over and over again.

But what is Jesus' response? Jesus comes over and touches them and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they get up, they notice that no one is around except Jesus himself alone. And they go back down the mountain together.

On the mount of Transfiguration, the disciples get a glimpse of Jesus' divinity, of Jesus' glory, of Jesus' true nature. Jesus is not only fully human, but also fully God. The disciples are afraid, and yet they don't die. They want to set up some tabernacles to keep Jesus' presence confined, yet instead, Jesus goes back down the mountain with them.

Something is new. Something is different. Moses was only allowed to see God's backside. God's glory was hidden in a cloud, too terrible for humans to see. God's presence was kept behind a thick curtain in the Temple. Yet now, in Jesus Christ, God can be seen face to face. The disciples could look upon the face of God, the face of Jesus, and they could do it safely.

As Peter would later write in our Epistle today, "We (were) eyewitnesses of his majesty... while we were with him on the holy mountain."

In Jesus, God was present. And God's presence in Jesus was not to be confined to a mountain, or to a tent, or to a temple. God was present in a person, a person who could live and move among us.

It's no accident that when St. John says, "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us," the word he uses for "dwelt" literally means "tabernacled" or "tented." In Jesus, God's tabernacle would no longer be a tent of wood and cloth set up in the midst of the camp. God's tent is now made of human flesh, and is able to dwell in our midst. God is no longer distant and unapproachable and unviewable. God now has a human body and a human face.

It's also no accident, that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple, the curtain of the temple, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world, this curtain was torn in two. The division between God and humans was no longer there. In the person of Jesus Christ, God found a way to be present and visible and knowable.

On this last Sunday of Epiphany, the season during which we celebrate Jesus' shining forth, Jesus' manifestation to the world, we give thanks for God's presence with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

And we give thanks for Jesus' presence among us today.

It is a presence that is knowable and tangible

He is present in our hearts.

His presence shines forth in bread and wine.

His presence manifests itself whenever God's people gather around his table as members of the Body of Christ.

The Word became flesh and is present in our midst.

The glory of the Lord has been revealed.

May we have grace to see him face to face.