

Memory Sites
Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9
February 3, 2008

Last month one of the world's greatest adventurers died, Sir Edmund Hilary. Along with his climbing companion, Tenzig Norgay, they were the first team to conquer the world's tallest mountain, Mt. Everest, rising 5 ½ vertical miles above sea level. He wrote of their final steps to the top of the world on May 29, 1953: "Another few weary steps and there was nothing above us but the sky. There was no false cornice, no final pinnacle. We were standing together on the summit. There was enough space for about six people. We had conquered Everest.

"Awe, wonder, humility, pride, exaltation—these surely ought to be the confused emotions of the first men to stand on the highest peak on Earth, after so many others had failed. But my dominant reactions were relief and surprise. Relief because the long grind was over and the unattainable had been attained. And surprise, because it had happened to me, old Ed Hilary, the beekeeper, once the star pupil of Tuakau District School, but no great shakes at Auckland Grammar [high school] and a no-hoper at university, first to the top of Everest. I just didn't believe it. I removed my oxygen mask to take some pictures. It wasn't enough just to get to the top. We had to get back with the evidence. Fifteen minutes later we began the descent."

In his 1999 book, *View From the Summit*, Hilary finally broke his long public silence about whether it was he or Norgay who was the first man to step atop Everest. "We drew closer together as Tenzing brought in the slack on the rope. I continued cutting a line of steps upwards. Next moment I had moved onto a flattish exposed area of snow with nothing but space in every direction. Tenzing quickly joined me and we looked round in wonder. To our immense satisfaction we realized we had reached the top of the world." Before Tenzing's death in 1986, Hillary consistently refused to confirm he was first, saying he and the Sherpa had climbed as a team to the top. It was a measure of his personal modesty, and of his commitment to his colleagues.

Hillary never forgot the small mountainous country that propelled him into worldwide fame. He revisited Nepal constantly over the next 54 years, helping build hospitals, health clinics, airfields, and schools. He raised funds for higher education for Sherpa families and helped set up reforestation programs in the impoverished country.ⁱ

Mountains have long held a mystical allure for human beings. The Psalmist wrote, "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2). American Indians understood mountains to be the sacred dwelling places of their gods. One tribe member said, "This is the place where I can listen to my maker."

The ancient peoples of the Holy Land also understood mountains to be "memory sites," as contemporary French scholars call them. "The sacred story of their people was enshrined in the mountaintops where the high heaven and the flat earth intersect. At these memory sites, their origins and the whole of their past were always available to them."ⁱⁱ

Moses is called to go up on the mountain of the Lord to receive the tablets of stone with the law and commandments for the instruction of the people. The glory of the Lord covers the mountain, symbolized by a cloud. Moses is invited into the divine presence, where he stays

forty days and forty nights. Forty days is also the length of the flood in Noah's day and of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It symbolizes a significant time in which the fires of purification and transformation can do their powerful work. During this time apart with the Lord, Moses is given the commandments which are to guide the Israelite people in the way of God. It is a transforming moment, not only for Moses, but also for his community of faith. Their lives are given new direction for the future.

Mountains frequently appear during Jesus' ministry and are locations where Jesus' authority is exerted. He is led to the mountain of temptation, where he wrestles with giving his loyalty to worship of evil or pledging his allegiance to God. Following in the footsteps of Moses, Jesus offers a new teaching on a mountain, popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' disciples are directed toward a mountain, where he commissions them, "Go and make disciples of all nations."

Today halfway through his ministry, Jesus and his inner circle of disciples have a mystical experience of God's presence on a mountaintop. In Matthew's chronology, the Transfiguration immediately follows Jesus' first foretelling of his death and resurrection. Peter had great difficulty accepting that his Master would be killed. Jesus continued with the challenging statement, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

In the face of these difficult sayings and as Jesus moves closer to Jerusalem, the time of his trial and crucifixion, this transforming mountaintop experience is offered. Jesus leads them into the sacred history of their faith, where they are reminded of their ancestors in the faith, Moses and Elijah, who persevered in faith in spite of the obstacles. They are admonished to listen to Jesus and to draw strength from the shared memory of God's presence in their lives. They even glimpse the shining face of God. There on the mountaintop, in the pure clear light at the mountain's peak, in that memory site, their eyes are opened to see the sacred light. It radiates from Jesus' face so that he shines like the sun and his clothing becomes dazzling white. The light pouring out from him illuminates their hearts, minds, and souls.

Patricia Farris suggests that "perhaps the Ancient of Days took great pleasure in these light shows."ⁱⁱⁱ In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light shattering the deep darkness, illuminating a planet of astonishing beauty and a multitude of colorful creatures. The brilliant presence Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai revealed the law, a way of life that would lead the people into right relationships with God and with one another. Many years later a bright star shone in the night sky, guiding Magi to a newborn king, the Prince of Peace, who would lead the people in the pathways of peace. Now that babe is a man, confirmed as God's Beloved, marked as God's chosen, illumined to be a blessing to God's people.

The light is not meant to dazzle or overwhelm, but to empower and set free. It helps those first disciples to put in perspective Jesus' teachings about carrying one's cross, suffering, and death. It is meant to light the way of their journey with him to the cross and beyond. It enables them to see in the dark by giving them the tools of night vision. Then they could rise at his command, like Lazarus, and pursue the fullness of life without fear.

“In the transfigured face of Christ, God’s light shines in our lives as well. Through grief and fear, doubt and cynicism, violence and war, suffering and death, our way is illumined by the holy light of God’s presence and love. We first see it on the mountaintop, and we carry it down to the flatlands and even into the valley of the shadow of death. The light from above then glows within and gradually dissolves all fear.”^{iv}

The awesome, inspiring stories of our faith, such as the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, are memory sites for us. They are mountaintop experiences that shine with the light of Christ’s saving and life-giving power. They are meant to be anchors which ground us when we are fearful and face the traumas of our lives. They remind us that the presence of Christ transcends the boundaries of heaven and earth. While they may not make sense to the rational mind, these memory sites transport us to a spiritual place where we are embraced in the cloud of God’s presence.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is such a holy mystery, a memory site, a remembrance of Christ’s abiding presence. We remember the gathering of the twelve disciples with their Master on that last evening of his life. They joyously came to commemorate the Passover, a festival of deliverance from slavery. But Jesus transfigured the meal, adding to it what would become a remembrance of his death and resurrection, the new covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

From the plains and valleys of life, we look up to the majestic mountains and remember that our help comes from the Lord. From the towering heights beam upon us the faith and sustenance to see us through the rigors of the journey. Although breathless from a tortuous climb, the Holy Spirit refreshes our breath and renews our strength.

We listen to the stories of memory sites that we too might dwell in the presence of our God. We reenact the mysterious memory of the Last Supper to anchor ourselves for the living of our days. May these mystical memories assure us of the abiding blessed presence of our God.

ⁱ Ray Wellington, “Sir Edmund Hillary, Everest Pioneer, Dies at 88,” Wellington, New Zealand, The Associated Press, January 10, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Patricia Farris, “Memory sites,” *The Christian Century*, January 16-23, 2002, p. 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

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