

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 24:12-18

^{24:12} The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." ¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Commentary

In 22:22-23:33, Moses has ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law verbally from God – both the Ten Commandments (“words”, v. 3) and the case law (“ordinances”). In v. 3, Moses has told them to the people; they have agreed to their side of the Covenant. (God’s side is to be their God and to protect them.) Moses has then written down all God has told him. The pact, the union between God and the people, has been ratified in blood, “the blood of the covenant” (v. 8). Blood has been dashed against the altar (symbolizing God) and sprinkled on the people. (Vv. 9-11 are from another oral tradition, so we skip to v. 12).

Now God offers to put all the laws in permanent form, on “tablets of stone”. So important is Moses’ ascent of the mountain that it is mentioned four times in vv. 12-18. Moses leaves “the elders” (v. 14) in charge and commissions “Aaron and Hur” to administer justice in his absence. God’s “glory” (vv. 16, 17) is an envelope of light, a bright “cloud”, veiling his being: the people can see the cloud, but not God. Unlike the light from the Burning Bush (Chapter 3), this appearance of God is frightening “like a devouring fire” (v. 17). Moses prepares to meet God for some time (“six days”, v. 16). “Forty days and forty nights” (v. 18) is reminiscent of the Flood, of the time the Israelites scouted out Canaan’s defenses before entering the Promised Land, and of Elijah’s later experience on the same mountain. It is a considerable length of time.

Reflection

This story of Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai is so familiar to us as People of the Book. Mountaintops figure prominently in this week's scripture readings, as we will see. What has been your most memorable "mountaintop experience," spiritually-speaking, and why?

2 Peter 1:16-21

^{1:16} For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰ First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹ because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Commentary

The author has written that God, ultimate "goodness" (v. 3), "who called us", has given us everything we need for eternal life. What Jesus promised to us is our means of escaping the "corruption" (v. 4) of this world and of attaining union with God. So, he says, our faith and knowledge of Christ should result in ethical living, "mutual affection" (v. 7) and love. If we have these qualities and if they grow in us, they will save us from being ineffectual and "unfruitful" (v. 8) in doing Christ's work. If we don't have them, we are "nearsighted and blind" (v. 9) and have forgotten the release from sin we obtained in baptism. So be steadfast in the faith; being thus will gain us entry into Christ's kingdom (v. 11). This letter is written as Peter's last testament as he approaches death, instructions he leaves to remind his readers of how to remember to be faithful. (vv. 12-15).

Now he speaks of the Transfiguration. While others (false teachers) have used "cleverly devised myths" (v. 16, deceitful lies to deceive members of the community: see 2:1-3), the author was an "eyewitness" to the event, one which showed the power of God and was a *preview of* Christ's second "coming". At that time, Jesus "received honor and glory from God the Father" (v. 17) when the heavenly voice identified him as "my Son, my Beloved ...". (The "Majestic Glory" is the Father.) Old Testament prophets ("prophetic message", v. 19) foretold the coming of the Messiah at the end of time; the Transfiguration *more fully confirms* this. Dear readers, hold to ("be attentive to") this hope in these times of corruption and false teachers – until the Second Coming ("until the day dawns") and Christ, "the morning star", assumes sovereignty.

Vv. 20-21 make two points:

- scripture should be interpreted in the community, not on "one's own", and

- true prophets, in every age, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak for God; they do not prophesy of their own volition.

Reflection

What are your criteria for distinguishing a “false teacher” from a “true prophet”?

Matthew 17:1-9

^{17:1} Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "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." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Commentary

Jesus has told his disciples that “the Son of Man is to come ... in the glory of his Father ... There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see ... [him] coming in his kingdom” (16:27-28). Now he and the inner circle of disciples ascend a mountain. Jesus is “transfigured” (v. 2, given an unearthly appearance). An aura of unnatural brightness is linked with mystical appearances in Exodus and Acts; “dazzling white” is a symbol of transcendence. In Jewish tradition, both “Moses and Elijah” (v. 3) were taken into heaven without dying; here Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets. Both are associated with Mount Sinai. Peter recognizes Jesus as “Lord” (v. 4), both earthly and heavenly sovereign. In his suggestion of making “dwellings” he thinks of Sinai, for dwellings (booths) were erected on the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the events there, and a time when the city was brightly lit. On Sinai too a “bright cloud” (v. 5) symbolized God’s presence. The words spoken by the voice recall Jesus’ baptism and add “listen to him”: Jesus is not only God’s Son and his Chosen, but also the prophet God promised to Moses.

Early Christians knew the book of Daniel well. Vv. 6-7 would tell them that this “vision” (v. 9) is linked to the end times: see Daniel 8:17 (where “mortal” is *son of man* in the Hebrew). Moses and Elijah vanish into insignificance, leaving Jesus alone. The Church Fathers saw the Transfiguration as fulfilling Jesus’ prediction that some would not die until they had seen the coming of God’s kingdom; others saw the event as a prophecy of the Second Coming.

Reflection

The story of the Transfiguration serves as a bridge between the Season after Epiphany and the season of Lent. As we prepare for the introspection and penitence that Lent asks of us as Christians, consider how this account of Jesus' divinity revealed upon a mountaintop speaks to you.

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 99

^{99:1} The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

² The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

⁴ Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵ Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.

⁷ He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

⁸ O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

⁹ Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.