

THE SPIRITUAL MOUNTAIN  
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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What is it about mountains and the spiritual life? Mount Sinai, Mount Olympus, Mount Fuji, Machu Picchu, Mount Athos, and the list goes on and on. Why is it that God seems to appear so dramatically on the tops of mountains, again and again? In this morning's reading from Exodus,<sup>i</sup> we learn that when Moses climbed Mount Sinai, he found that "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain."<sup>ii</sup> In the reading from Matthew,<sup>iii</sup> we're told that when Jesus climbed a high mountain, he became transfigured, "and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." God's voice is heard from a bright cloud at the top, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased."<sup>iv</sup>

A friend of mine who's both a mountaineer and a scholar of comparative religion, Ed Bernbaum, wrote a book published by the University of California Press some 20 years ago, entitled *Sacred Mountains of the World*.<sup>v</sup> In it he explains that "People have traditionally revered mountains as places of sacred power and spiritual attainment."<sup>vi</sup> He writes that "The ethereal rise of a ridge in mist, the glint of moonlight on an icy face, a flare of gold on a distant peak – such glimpses of transcendent beauty can reveal our world as a place of unimaginable mystery and splendor. In the fierce play of natural elements that swirl about their summits – thunder, lightning, wind, and clouds – mountains also embody powerful forces beyond our control, physical expressions of an awesome reality that can overwhelm us with feelings of wonder and fear."<sup>vii</sup>

Over 30 years ago I had the opportunity to climb Jebel Musa in the Sinai Desert, a mountain that's claimed to be the very Mount Sinai on which Moses met God. I wrote about it in my book *Finding Your Religion*.<sup>viii</sup> With my traveling companions we started up from the plain of Raha, where the Children of Israel were said to have camped and fashioned a golden calf while Moses was far above them. We began at 3:00 a.m., before the desert sun could wilt our fragile "civilized" bodies, choosing a wide path on the lower part of the mountain that narrowed to what seemed to be a stairway to heaven higher up. More than three thousand steps had been cut into the rock by monks centuries ago. Breathing heavily and drenched with sweat, we finally made it to an arch of stone at the top of the steps. The landscape by now looked like the moon, not the earth. But the steepest part of the climb to the 7,500-foot summit still lay ahead over bare rock. When we made it, the rising sun accentuated the deep fissures and rifts in the surrounding mountains. All was empty red wilderness as far as the eye could see. Indeed it felt as if "the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the

mountain.” Even the utterly unreligious among us spoke only in whispers as the rest sat scattered about in stunned silence.<sup>ix</sup>

But we don't need to venture out to find one of these sacred mountains of the world to climb in order to pursue spirituality. I like to think that the fundamental metaphor of the religious life itself is climbing the spiritual mountain – all the time, day in and day out, wherever we are and whatever we're doing. There are many paths up that mountain -- many ways that can reach the top (although very few people actually get to the summit of the high mountain of spirituality). Those paths may be rough or smooth, steep or gentle, boring or colorful, tiring or exhilarating. Yet, they're all on the same spiritual mountain, and ultimately they all converge at the very top, as mystics of all religions have told us.

For most of us who aren't mystics, though, the point is to experience the journey -- to find fulfillment in our pilgrimage on the mountain itself -- rather than to miss everything along the way in pursuit of the summit. For it can be literally breath taking up there at the top. Few people are able to stay there very long. In mountaineering language, it's the difference between peak-bagging and trekking. Peak-baggers may report a glorious view, but trekkers tend to experience a lot more of the flora and fauna and ever-changing sights all along the way.<sup>x</sup>

The first challenge is metaphorically to pick a path and start walking, because the tendency to sit in an armchair and view the spiritual mountain from a safe distance won't get one very far. Some exertion and effort is required. The next question is whether to wander, or to proceed along marked trails and paths. Of course, it's possible to make progress by striking out on one's own and bushwhacking through the brambles and undergrowth. That may seem to promise the most excitement and fun. But it's also a lot easier to get lost this way, to start going around in circles, to become exhausted and burnt out. It can become lonely and frightening if you're by yourself without a path.

There are major world religions that have been around for millennia and have had billions of followers. The great religions, I believe, are wide paths, which have accommodated the individual needs of radically different people. They have included mystics and intellectuals, artists and professional people, social activists and common laborers. They've spoken in a wide variety of ways to people of all ages and all stages of spiritual development. No major religion from my perspective is inherently any more "right" than another. There are no locks that any have on "salvation," insight, community, creativity, or meaning. On the other hand, it's through established, organized religions that we encounter much of what's called "spirituality," and spirituality can best be developed, I believe, along one of their paths.

All of this isn't to say that in spiritual mountain climbing one might not want to try different paths at different times. Even on one route, it's helpful to talk to pilgrims on other paths at trail crossings about what they've encountered and seen. Travelling companions on the same path may also have very different personal experiences, depending on who they are and what they're looking for. Nonetheless, there are good reasons that trails have been worn on a mountainside: they help the trekker to progress without unnecessary obstacles and injury, they lead to points of interest, they facilitate camaraderie among fellow travellers, and

the many feet that have gone before have kept the trails maintained for the next generation of venturers.<sup>xi</sup>

The next move, it seems to me, is to begin actually experiencing -- opening one's senses as one metaphorically climbs the mountain. That is, becoming more awake and alert to the environment around you -- to your own bodily sensations of smell, sight, hearing, feel, and taste. For example, smell the distinctive odors upon entering this church. Look around you at the magnificent stained glass and mosaics. Hear the glorious music of our organist and choir. Feel your breath moving in and out in the silence of prayer. Taste the bread and wine of communion. Through these experiences, new ways can emerge on the spiritual mountain metaphorically to smell the flowers, see the sunrise, hear the birds sing, feel the wind in your face, and taste food as you stop to share a meal.<sup>xii</sup>

The journey's enhanced not only by following a path, but also by joining with fellow travellers. With them we can discuss our discoveries and our doubts, our hopes and our fears, our ideas and our feelings. We're not alone in our searching, and travelling companions can help us see and experience a lot along the way that we'd otherwise miss. Your questions will challenge and help others, just as their perceptions will widen your perspective and deepen your practice. Some fellow travellers on your path may be "experts" with names like "clergy," "gurus," or "masters." But be certain that the experts enhance your journey, rather than substituting themselves for your own fresh sensations of the spiritual mountain itself.

Then there's the comparative approach of learning from trail crossings even as one has set off on a particular path. Experimenting with Buddhist and Hindu meditation can enhance Christian and Jewish prayer life and vice versa. Understanding how different traditions grieve their dead can make it easier for each of us -- in giving and receiving sympathy and help -- in mourning the loss of someone close to us. Learning about the spiritual experiences of Muslims during the month long fast of Ramadan can help Jews to find new meaning in keeping kosher, Christians to use Lent as a rich period of self-examination when they haven't reflected for years, and Hindus to emulate Gandhi's use of fasting at times of profound personal and social turmoil. Appreciating the similarities and differences between various celebrations at the time of the vernal equinox -- like Passover, Easter, and May Day -- can enliven the season for all of us.<sup>xiii</sup>

So, in the end, what's the point of it all? To reach the top of the mountain? To see God face to face? To become enlightened and attain Nirvana? If so, most of us will fail. While few of us are capable of attaining mystical states regularly, though, I think almost all of us are briefly surprised by them -- blindsided, if you will -- from time to time. It might be coming around a corner and being surprised by a glorious waterfall -- one that transfixes us with its beauty and the particular way the water comes down. It might be a stunning sunset, lightening in the distance, the soft murmurs of a trailside brook, or the riot of spring wildflower color in a mountain meadow.<sup>xiv</sup>

So, it's my claim that the religious life is an ongoing journey up the spiritual mountain, with all the variety and complexity and beauty and awe imaginable. The most important thing to remember is that each of us can start climbing and then keep climbing. Each of us has rich, dynamic pilgrimage journeys to recognize and experience. Each of us can perceive the mountain in the distance, open ourselves to the possibility of mountain climbing, approach it, pick a path, start walking, and experience the journey in depth. It might be a continuation of a familiar path from an earlier time in our lives or new paths as we go. But once we really start climbing, other travellers will help us along the way. And there's lots to learn about the mountain by meeting people who've been on other paths. There may be some tough times ahead, but they can strengthen us. There are also possibilities for a lot of joy on that mountainside. If we keep our senses of humor and our willingness to celebrate, the journey can enrapture us and transform our lives. The spiritual mountain beckons.<sup>xv</sup>

### BENEDICTION

The courage of the early morning's dawning,  
And the strength of the ancient hills,  
And the peace of the evening's ending,  
And the love of God,  
Be in our hearts, now and always. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 24: 12-18.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 24:17.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 17: 1-9.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 17:5.

<sup>v</sup> Edwin Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 207, 210.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.