

**Mountain Mysteries, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E4080203**  
**Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9**  
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Life is full of mysteries. A church member e-mailed me the following mysteries: If nothing sticks to Teflon, how do they stick Teflon on the pan? --It's a mystery! If you throw a cat out a car window, does it become kitty litter? Why are there Interstate highways in Hawaii? It's a mystery!

The United Church of Christ formed its roots in the Enlightenment period of history. We are invited to use our brains in the Christian faith. This implies rationality, but there is much of the Christian faith that is irrational. The answers to some of our questions do not come to us through thinking, reasoning, or quantifying. Why does God love us? Why does God forgive us? After all, we humans killed God's son Jesus.

There are mysteries in the Christian faith. How could a child be born to a virgin? How could a body, once dead, be resurrected to new life? The brief answer is that God and God's ways are much larger than our puny human minds can comprehend.

Today's New Testament scripture lesson presents us with a mystery. Jesus took three disciples with him up onto a mountain, and there, before their eyes, he turned a bright white while two Old Testament Biblical figures appeared with him: Moses and Elijah.

There is a mountain in Galilee called the Mount of Transfiguration. It is Mt. Tabor or Mt. Tabor. It's located in the plain of Jezreel, south of Nazareth and east of Tel Aviv. What happened on that mountain that day that was reported by Matthew? Some say the whole experience was a post-resurrection story that got transposed. They say it really happened later, but Matthew, Mark and Luke placed it in their Gospels signaling the transition from the Galilean period of Jesus' ministry to his march toward Jerusalem and death.

Others have said the transfiguration must have been a hallucination of James, Peter and John. You have to admit, it does sound a bit hallucinatory. Jesus appeared a dazzling white. Two dead men appeared with Jesus and a voice came out of the clouds. Perhaps that cloud of mist reflected the sun's light in such a way that Jesus appeared much brighter and somehow the cloud made shapes like Elijah and Moses. When we try to reason our way through this religious experience, we still end up with mystery.

Some of the mystery can be cleared up with a little bit of thinking. The account begins with the words, "Six days later..."<sup>1</sup> Six days later than what? Than Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Who were these dead Old Testament figures and why were they there with Jesus that day? Moses died twelve hundred years before. Elijah died nine hundred years before. What were they doing there on that mountain?

When Jesus lived as a human being, the only holy scriptures that existed were the Law and the Prophets. Remember that when he taught what we call the "Golden Rule", he referred to "the law and the prophets," the scriptures of his day: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."<sup>3</sup> Moses represented the Law or Torah. We

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 17:1

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 16:16

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 7:12

also call this the Pentateuch: the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Elijah represented the Prophets. Elijah was the great classic prophet in a line that continued from Joshua through Malachi. It included Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

The sight of Jesus on that mountain transfigured with Moses and Elijah is a mystery, but it has meaning. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus stands squarely in their tradition. There is continuity from the great leaders of the Old Testament, the law and prophetic traditions, through Jesus the Messiah. Six days before, we had the human confirmation in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, in the transfiguration on that mountaintop, we have divine confirmation of Peter's confession of faith, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"<sup>4</sup>

Peter's response is mysterious. He wanted to build three booths or buildings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Peter's is a human response. I closely identify with Peter's humanity. He is the one who did not want Jesus to wash his feet. Then, when Jesus insisted, Peter demanded, "Then don't wash just my feet, wash me all over."<sup>5</sup> Peter is the one who jumped out of the boat to walk on water the way Jesus did, and he succeeded for a few steps, but then he got to thinking about what was happening.<sup>6</sup> He got shaky and began to sink. Peter was the first of the disciples to confess that Jesus was the Messiah.<sup>7</sup> Peter is the one who said he would never deny Jesus after he was arrested, but then, he went back on his word. He denied he knew Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

Peter is human and we are much like him. It is typical, when faced with the unexplainable or the holy, to be awestruck. When we are awe-struck, we want to freeze the moment and keep it fixed in our memory and in time. "Let's build something permanent," so we build church buildings which over time come to hold more importance than the gospel for which the building was built to honor in the first place.

People may be touched by a song or prayer and want to do it again. And again. Soon, the song or prayer is repeated so often it becomes ritualized, and worshipers complain when you try to change or remove it.

Peter was so awe-struck, that he wanted to build three buildings: "Let's construct three buildings to commemorate the day." King Constantine and his mother, Helena, ran all over the Holy Land of Palestine constructing elaborate churches and basilicas to commemorate whatever happened on each site they could find. They built a church on the site of St. Peter's mother's house. They built one over Jesus' tomb, one where he fed the multitude, and, of course, on Mt. Tabor.

We have our own mountaintop experiences: a hike on mountain to see the spring-time buds and flowers or a prayer in a quiet place set apart. We tend to want to ritualize them, to repeat them over and over. But, we cannot repeat them. Each one is different. Each one has its own special worth and significance. We must leave the mountain and come down and live our daily lives, however. We must live with the people who make us impatient, the ones who lie, or betray friendships.

Life has its mysteries. As Valentine's Day approaches, we can ask, "What is love?" We can

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<sup>4</sup>Matthew 17:5

<sup>5</sup>John 13:8-9

<sup>6</sup>Matthew 14:29-31

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 16:16

<sup>8</sup>Matthew 26:75

explain hormones, and the desire to continue our species through procreation, but how does a couple remain committed to each other for sixty-three years? It's a mystery.

God is a mystery. We cannot think ourselves into understanding or comprehending God. We can only accept God's love by declaring it a divine mystery.

What happened on that mountain that day was a mystery. We cannot fully comprehend it, but we know that it signifies important aspects of Jesus. Jesus continues the line of salvation history through the law and the prophets, reaffirming God's unending love for God's creation.

We know that God does not want us to fossilize the Gospel with buildings and rituals. God wants us to be open to new ways of expressing and spreading love. God's love is ever dynamic and ever present. We can only respond to the mystery of God's love by loving God and loving our neighbors, our families, and our enemies.

