

February 23, 2020
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16-219
Matthew 17:1-7

Dog or cat? PC or Mac? Cake or pie? Pen or pencil? Coke or Pepsi? Morning or evening? Coffee or tea? Mountain or beach?

This-or-that questions make fun ice-breakers, and at least one carries the potential of a deeper reveal. The Journal of Research Psychology published an article by researchers from the University of Virginia titled "Personality and Geography: Introverts Prefer Mountains." I read that headline and thought, *DUH!* That's probably because I'm an introvert who always chooses mountain over beach. Admittedly I also enjoy the wilderness coastlines of northwest Washington and northeast Maine, but they are simply the exceptions that prove the rule. Here's the abstract from the article:

In five studies, we tested the link between personality and geography. We found that mountain-lovers were more introverted than ocean-lovers (Study 1). People preferred the ocean over mountains when they wanted to socialize with others, but they preferred the mountains and the ocean equally when they wanted to decompress alone (Study 2). In Study 3, we replicated the introversion–extraversion differences using pictures of mountains and oceans. Furthermore, this difference was explained in part by extraverts' perception that it would take more work to have fun in the mountains than in the ocean. Extending the first three studies to non-students, we found that residents of mountainous U.S. states were more introverted than residents of flat states (Study 4). In Study 5, we tested the link between introversion and the mountains experimentally by sending participants to a flat, open area or a secluded, wooded area. The terrain did not make people more introverted, but introverts were happier in the secluded area than in the flat/open area, which is consistent with the person–environment fit hypothesis.¹

Human beings necessarily bound in complex relationship with landscape. As with all living things, this began as the functional working out of survival and sustenance. As the human brain evolved, landscape became a source of meaning and metaphor. Now we hear that landscape is capable of shaping and swaying the humans who occupy it. It might just be that research is finally catching up to what perceptive individuals have long known. From survival and sustenance to meaning and metaphor to shaping and swaying, it's all right there in Genesis.

If the Gospels are true and the research is correct, then one might conclude that Jesus chooses "mountain" and is therefore an introvert. After all, just last Sunday featured Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Next Sunday we'll get Satan tempting Jesus on a mountaintop. Today offered a trip up a high mountain for the transfiguration. Then again, the gospels also include stories placing Jesus at the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. It was there at Jesus' baptism that God spoke the exact same words that God speaks today: "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I have delighted."² God again affirms that Jesus is *the one*. This time, the top Hebrew prophets Moses and Elijah are present, in effect offering silent assent. Moses and Elijah were themselves prior recipients of mountaintop theophanies. They never died but were taken up by God.

Lent begins on Wednesday, so today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany. On the Epiphany and for the weeks following, we hear stories of how the human Jesus is revealed to be also divine. It seems to me that this is really part of the longer story that began on the first Sunday of Advent. With Advent, Christmas, and the season after the Epiphany, we course from anticipation to celebration to revelation. God is with us, and human is divine.

In this story arc, Christmas is the climax of our celebration. But the huge emphasis on Christmas is a recent innovation, more cultural than Christian, due in part to the rise of consumerism. Maybe this long stretch really culminates *today*. Maybe, since December 1, we've been walking up the mountain to this capstone moment. It is the exclamation point on the marriage of humanity and divinity within Jesus, and the marriage of divinity with humanity in the world. Peter, James, and John are there as witnesses. They're standing in for the rest of the disciples; they're standing in for us. In effect, we're all at the top of that mountain. But we won't stay long. After this, Jesus himself begins the long slog to the cross, and we have to go with him. And so it is that, starting on Ash Wednesday, we dip down into the valley through which we walk to the cross on the way to the resurrection. We won't be atop this mountain for very long, so let's make the most of it. We're going to need what it has to offer.

I imagine that you've all seen those working place motivational posters that feature a photograph of some natural scene with a single giant word splashed across the bottom and beneath it in smaller print a phrase of explanation. Often the natural feature pictured is a mountain. For example, one features a photograph of what looks like a range of the Swiss Alps. It has the word "Determination," beneath which is written, "Desire is the key to motivation, but it's determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal - a commitment to excellence - that will enable you to attain the success you seek."³ Another has a photograph of a craggy peak that looks like it might be in Patagonia. Its word is "Possibilities," followed by the phrase, "Until we climb the mountain of our insecurities, we can't even begin to explore our possibilities."⁴ Apparently I'm not the only person who finds those posters, while perhaps beautiful, at least slightly annoying; one can also now purchase satirical *demotivational* posters. On one, the photograph is a backlit image of a tiny backpacker at the base of a high steep slope. It says, "Challenges - I expected times like this, but I never thought they'd be so bad, so long, and so frequent."⁵

I recently noticed that I have regularly been using the word "landscape" in conversation. Maybe it has become a buzzword and I grabbed it. Or maybe it's because landscape and my interaction with landscape have been on my mind. It seems to have started in earnest with our trip last August to Acadia National Park. On one beautiful day, I parked my car and without moving it was able to spend the morning hiking to the top of a mountain and back down again, and the afternoon sitting for hours on rocks by crashing ocean waves. Acadia is one of the very few places in the country where it's possible to do that. Even on busy summer days, Acadia is spacious, and so my introvert self was very happy. I realized that day just how intensely I have been missing the wilderness. I was also aware that access to wilderness is a privilege available to me because I possess the necessary resources of expendable income, leisure time, and physical fitness. Not everyone possesses these things. My own access is likely to decrease as I age. My spiritual life has often relied on access to literal mountaintops. But I also need to remember that access to wilderness cannot be my cure-all.

Some days it seems like everyone in my Facebook feed is off on a “pilgrimage”: to the Camino de Santiago in Spain; to the Holy Land in Israel; to Iona in Scotland. I feel sometimes feel faced with “competitive tourism” topped off with “competitive Christianity.” It’s sort of like endeavoring to climb each of the world’s highest mountains; you have to tick off each box on the list of the current hottest Christian places to go around the world. I’m sure they are all amazing, and I even have a couple on my bucket list. But it may also be that they are distractions—distractions from seeking and finding God in the less-sexy landscape right here.

God can be experienced across the street in Edgerton Park. God can be experienced upstairs at our Delight Nights. God can even be experienced in the vicinity of the bus stop on the New Haven Green. God makes Godself known to us. Just as epiphany came as a surprise to Peter, James, and John, it almost always comes as a surprise to us. I wish I had an instruction book for how to conjure it up. I really do. I would use it. But I don’t have one. I think it helps to make ourselves vulnerable to the amazing glory of God by following Jesus on the way of love. I think it helps to keep remembering that theophany didn’t stop with the transfiguration. I think it helps to prop open the door of possibility onto the everyday landscape of our lives.

After church, go outside and turn around. *This* is the landscape of *our* survival and sustenance, our meaning and metaphor, our shaping and swaying. It blesses us with moments of grace.

Notes

¹ Shigehiro Oishi, Thomas Talhelm, and Minha Lee, “Personality and Geography: Introvers Prefer Mountains” *Journal of Research into Personality*, vol. 58 (October 2015). This is from the abstract, which is available online at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0092656615300027> (accessed February 23, 2020).

² This is the translation of Matthew 3:17 b and Matthew 17:5b from David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). [In the original Greek the text of the two verses is identical, though the New Revised Standard Version renders them slightly differently (3:17 as “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” and 17:5 as “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.”)]

³ The “Determination Mountain Motivational Poster” is available to purchase from Successories Inc. online at <https://www.successories.com/motivational-posters/98771-determination-mountain-motivational-poster> (accessed February 23, 2020).

⁴ The “Possibilities Mountain Motivational Poster” is available to purchase from Successories Inc. online at <https://www.successories.com/motivational-posters/95798-possibilities-mountain-motivational-poster> (accessed February 23, 2020).

⁵ The “Challenges” poster is available to purchase from Despair, Inc. online at <https://despair.com/products/challenges?variant=2457296067> (accessed February 23, 2020).