

Ivan Doig is an author who grew up in Montana and who writes beautifully about the Rocky Mountains

This is a passage from his memoir *This House of Sky*, describing a place his family lived near Glacier National Park (p. 180-181)

Without a doubt, there is something special about mountains

- They are not like any other form in the landscape, no matter how beautiful
- They project an elemental and awesome power which dwarfs mere people and our creations
- They lift our eyes beyond day-to-day visions, bringing us into the realm of God

Today we remember that Jesus also experienced the grandeur of mountains, that he cherished their lofty heights as places of prayer and meditation

- It was “up on a high mountain” that he brought his disciples to hear the Sermon on the Mount and to receive the Great Commission
- In today's reading of the Transfiguration (*Mt 17:1*) he took Peter, James and John into that ethereal world to show them, when the wisest words failed, who he really is
- With Moses and Elijah by his side, Jesus shone with a resplendent light which “overshadowed” the poor disciples

My Bible Dictionary says that “mountains are a dominant feature of the biblical landscape...” (*Westminster Bible Dictionary*)

- Mountains shaped ancient Palestine by their influence on climate, settlement patterns, and the elements of the local economy
- But more importantly, mountains dominated the contours of the sacred stories through which the people found identity and meaning as a community
- Critical milestones in the growth of their relationship with God would not have been possible anywhere else
- The Hebrew Scriptures simply could not have emerged from a flat-land culture

The life of Moses, the greatest of the Israelites, revolved around two mountaintop encounters

- The Book of Exodus tells us that while caring for his father-in-law's flock, Moses came to Horeb (also called Sinai), the mountain of God. There "an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire..." (*Ex 3:2*)
- Called by God from the burning bush, Moses returned to Egypt to lead his people out of captivity
- The journey across the Red Sea and into the desert brought them back to the sacred mountain, where "Moses went up to God" (*Ex 19:3*)
- Blasting trumpets summoned him into a dense cloud on top of the mountain, and the LORD spoke in thunder
- There Moses received the Ten Commandments, which have guided his people to this day
- Moses was on the mountain forty days and nights, and when he came down the skin of his face shone with an unearthly light, "because he had been talking with God" (*Ex 34:29*)

The Word of the Lord came to the prophet Elijah during a time of terrible drought (*1 Kings 18*)

- He rose to prominence on Mount Carmel, when he challenged 450 prophets of Baal (a Canaanite god) to call down fire from heaven
- Where the 450 failed Elijah succeeded, and after his offerings had been consumed by fire, the LORD sent rain to break the drought
- This event brought the wrath of Queen Jezebel upon Elijah, and he fled for his life

After traveling forty days and nights he came to Horeb, the sacred mountain, where he hid in a cave (*1 Kings 19:8*)

- The Word of the LORD called him out onto the mountain peak, where Elijah encountered a great rock-splitting wind and earthquakes and fire, but this time the LORD was not revealed with such drama
- In the aftermath came the "sound of sheer silence," through which the presence of God appeared to Elijah
- There he received his personal commission, to anoint kings for Israel and to set apart the prophet Elisha, who would become his successor

Most everyone in Colorado goes up into the mountains for one reason or another

- We don't usually think of these trips as being quests for God's presence
- We speak of recreation and beauty and adventure as our goals
- But the dramatic elements of the biblical stories are familiar to us

The awesome power Moses encountered on Mount Horeb is mindful of being caught in a mountain thunderstorm, with thunder echoing off the canyon walls

- Where else but in the highest heights would we see an unearthly glow lighting up someone's face?
- Mountains are known for revealing amazing qualities of light, as the sun breaks through clouds or when it's low in the sky
- And the "sound of sheer silence" found by Elijah is a familiar companion to wilderness hikers, as the background noise of our daily lives fades from awareness
- None of these experiences is unusual in Colorado, but truthfully, how often do you associate them with Jesus?
- Don't we usually think of him today in the context of the church building?

Peter and his friends thought they knew who Jesus was

- They'd seen the wonders of his healing, the wisdom of his teaching, the power of his presence
- Peter had even correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah
- But they didn't really understand, not yet—and Jesus wanted to give them a glimpse of what was to come
- So he took them up on the mountain, where vision expands and deepens, where human constructions are dwarfed by the wonders of creation, where they could begin to see the world through God's eyes

And how did Peter and James and John react?

- They were terrified and fell to the ground "overcome by fear"
- Suddenly, Jesus was no longer their familiar friend or teacher or travel companion

- Though they may be unsettling, there are moments in the mountains when we are able to see with crystal clarity
- When the muddle of our lives seems to make sense, when somehow we “know” we’re on the right track
- That feeling doesn’t have to last forever—it can be a touchstone we return to when we’re back down to earth in our daily lives

Today’s Gospel story ends with Jesus ordering the disciples not to tell anyone about what they had seen

- The Bishop who ordained me used to joke that the only Bible verse Episcopalians take literally is “Go and tell no one.”
- He was poking fun at our reticence, but there’s a tantalizing kernel of truth in what Jesus says here
- The Transfiguration wasn’t going to make sense until after the Resurrection, the key to unlocking the eternal mysteries of life
- Only then would the awesomeness of God be fully revealed
- Until then there’s really not much to say in human words

But treasure in your hearts the glimpses of eternity we find on our mountain journeys

- The delicate beauty of a mountain stream cascading down from the rocky heights
- The graceful flight of an eagle soaring over steep valleys
- The virgin whiteness of a snowy landscape—the cold rush of the wind through the trees
- The stillness of a mountain lake and the wildness of the peaks
- The dazzling rays of the sun going down behind a jagged horizon

These are some of the most vivid and powerful signs of the presence of God, which “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” (*1 Cor 13:12*)

- Look for Jesus in the mountains... but wait, tell no one, until the day when the heart of the world is revealed