

Epiphany Last
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM
Mission Sunday

February 7, 2016
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Mount Sinai

One of the things I love about living in the mountains is the interplay between mountains and clouds. Clouds in a sunset or sunrise over mountains give color and vibrancy to an already stunning vista. Clouds in the mountains can bring relief from the sun or life-threatening weather. Clouds are the only thing bigger than a mountain, and on the other hand, mountains make clouds. And then how many times do clouds roll down off the mountains bringing (as they did this last week) snow, or rain—life-giving precipitation in our desert environment?

Mountains and clouds figure in both the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel today. In the Old Testament lesson this is Moses' second time up Mt. Sinai to bring down the tablets of the law. The first time he disappeared into a ferocious storm-cloud on the mountain, and the people thought he was gone for good, so they made a golden calf and worshipped it as the god that brought them up out of Egypt. Some scholars see this as a worship of the Egyptian god Ra who is described as a golden calf, others associate it with the worship of Yah, a Canaanite god. Either way, Moses is not happy and breaks the tablets of stone. They have obviously rejected the worship that Moses has been teaching them, so in symbol of that he breaks the laws...

God then calls Moses up the second time to the mountain. We have no record of more storm-clouds, but the memory is there, to be sure. Out of the cloud comes the law. The law is the power of Yahweh to break the bondage of Egypt and to form a nation with a special calling in the world, to show to the world what the heart of God is like. This time there is a lingering display of that power: Moses' face goes all shiny and it scares people. They want some protection from the unmitigated experience of the holy.

In the Gospel lesson we also have a mountain, a cloud, and confused worshippers. You have to assume that Peter, James and John knew the story of Sinai and Moses. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus make a direct link between this experience and the stories of Sinai. Now, however, the Law is replaced with Jesus as God's spokesperson. Peter's three dwellings make about as much sense as the Golden Calf—they are both distractions, a derailing of what is really going on.

Here, too, there is a display of power. Jesus' whole body gets shiny: Jesus is not just the face of God, but the presence of God. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that Moses

foreshadowed.

Here, too, there is a lingering sense of power. They go down from the mountain, and Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy whom the disciples could not heal. The message is clear: From this New Testament Sinai God has come down in power to break the power of the devil and bring about the reign of God.

Mountains are two-way streets. Moses ascends the mountain comes down bringing God's power. Jesus and the three disciples ascend the mountain and bring back the power of the Incarnation. We ascend the mountain in prayer, worship, and study, and we bring back down from our Sinai, the power of God to transform our world. We put feet on it in bringing about the reign of God, the reign of freedom born of God, the reign of justice born of love.

Today is Mission Sunday. Good Shepherd is our Sinai, our mountain to which we ascend in worship, study and prayer. Here we encounter God, we see the glory, we sense the presence, and we are left changed. From here we go forth to spread the good news of God's saving power.

We can get distracted, if we don't watch our steps. The temptation to go back to what we know is strong; the Golden Calf of Egypt is seductive. Our traditions are our story, our foundations, our grounding, but just because we have always (or never) done it this way isn't a reason not to try something new. "New" doesn't mean "unfaithful to the tradition." The temptation to enshrine our present glory is strong. The booths of our mountaintop are inviting. We like gathering together for worship. It is a great experience, and we like one another, but life cannot be lived only on them mountaintop. The valley awaits us as the realm of the manifestation of the power of God.

We do it in a number of ways. The "official" ways are:

6th Street School Ministry	Public Liturgies
After School Program	Ashes to the World
United Campus Ministry	Guadalupe
Palomas Mission	Posadas
Orphanage	Blessing of Animals
Feeding the poor and scholarships	Blessing of the Bikes
Honduras Mission	Hosted ministries
Viet Nam Mission	AA
Just Coffee	Garden Club
	Laughter Club
	Yoga

There are unofficial ways as well. Last week I think we rather befuddled our friends from Palomas. On the one hand we look pretty Roman Catholic to them, with the formality, the vestments and the stately music. On the other hand you all were so incredibly welcoming! You wanted them here, you enjoyed their music and their participation, and you want to go visit them! You shared the power of our Sinai with our friends from Elim Church, Palomas. We share the power in other ways as well. When you invite someone to Church, when you share when it wasn't expected, when you reach out to the loveless, and unlovely, whenever our prayer, study and worship inspire our action, we live out the power of our Sinai in the desert around us.

Mission Sunday—it is a day in the year of the Church, and it is a way of life with God and one another.