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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Year A

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Psalms 99

### **God's Power, God's Love**

About ten years ago my wife and I had the opportunity to take a trip to Peru and hike the Inca Trail. The Inca Trail is a couple of trails that go through the Andes Mountains over the course of a few days. You pass a few different ancient Inca settlements before finishing at Machu Picchu, a now-abandoned fifteenth-century city of the Incas. It is an awe-inspiring sight.

What I found even more dramatic, however, are the views of what is called the Sacred Valley, formed by the Andes and the Urubamba River. The views from up in the mountain of the river below, watering fertile soil, is amazing. I remember one day standing at a remote spot and gazing out at the Sacred Valley, and I completely understood why it was called sacred. Huge mountains topped with snow on either side; a river snaking through their bases; farmland on the banks; a big open blue sky above. There on the side of the mountain, I had a sense of myself standing next to one of those ancient Incas, looking out, both of us amazed.

No wonder it is called the Sacred Valley. If for no reason other than scale, no person could have created it. It could only have been created by a god whose creative powers exceed any others (through whatever process it may have been). However much control we have over our environment, we don't control something like this. This is something else entirely. The Incas knew it. I knew it. We were looking at the handiwork of God, which is its own experience of God.

One natural response to an encounter with God—one recordable as far back as we have records—is sheer terror. A God who can stand outside creation in order to form creation is a God who can just as easily destroy creation. If God can do this, what could he do to me? The overwhelming power of God, which is evident in looking at the Sacred Valley means that, however much we enjoy the view, it is also a testament to the fact that our control over our environment, our cultures, our lives, are incomplete, terribly incomplete. Sheer terror is not inappropriate. "The Lord is King; let the people tremble," says the psalm. And tremble they did.

And, a response to that sheer terror—one recordable as far back as we have records—is to make sacrifices. It isn't just the Incas. Every evidence of the religious impulse we have ever seen involves making sacrifices. They look out at the Sacred Valley, realizing the awesome power of God, asking for God's mercy, offering something, something valuable, to stave off the power from coming down on their heads. They made sacrifices. In the face of the Sacred Valley, they sacrificed animals, and they sacrificed humans, adults and children. Sheer terror. Appease the God.

In a more comfortable age, with electric lights and penicillin and earthquake-proof buildings, we may appreciate the natural world for its beauty, but without the fear of our pre-modern ancestors. But their impulse wasn't wrong. It was incomplete, but it wasn't wrong. It still isn't.

In Exodus, Moses went up to the top of the mountain, and what the people saw from down below was a devouring fire. They knew Moses was there. They must have figured he was burned to a

crisp. Moses may very well have been afraid he would be burned to a crisp. He was there, apparently in silence, for six days before God spoke. Exodus tells us that he remained there for forty days and forty nights. Imagine what it was like.

The people below, to put it technically, freaked out. A natural response to witnessing the awesome power of God is sheer terror, and they were terrified. Down below, while God was speaking with Moses, they built the golden calf. If Moses' God was going to destroy him, maybe they could avoid the same fate by finding someone else to watch out for them. They made sacrifices to the Golden Calf, which Moses subsequently destroyed. But the impulse is understandable. When you encounter the power of God...

It was this same kind of experience that is recorded in the story of the Transfiguration, which we heard from the gospel of Matthew. Jesus took with him his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, and they went up a "high mountain, by themselves." And there, Jesus, the friend they knew, with whom they had broken bread and conversed and learned, was transfigured, changed, such that God's very own glory shown in his face. It was an overwhelming sight. But there was more: Moses was there with him, the very same Moses who had had his own experience on the mountain with God, which Peter, James, and John would have known about. And Elijah, who had been taken up into heaven in his chariot of fire. But there was more: a bright cloud covered them, just as it had covered Moses. But there was more: a voice—the voice of God—spoke out of heaven, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

A natural response to an encounter with God is sheer terror, and the disciples were terrified. "They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear."

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We read the story of the Transfiguration at the end of Epiphany every year. Epiphany is when we answer the question that is first asked at Christmas: "What child is this?" What child is this that is born to Mary? What child is this that is born in Bethlehem, birthplace of David? What child is this that the angels announce? What child is this that the foreign Magi worship? What child is this? On the mountain of Transfiguration, at the end of Epiphany, that question is answered. He isn't just a wise teacher, a spiritual guru; he isn't just a political activist; he isn't only a prophetic witness against the religious leadership; he isn't even only a very effective natural healer and miracle worker.

The child born to Mary is God himself, without reserve; this is what was seen on the mountain of Transfiguration. The Transfiguration causes us, causes them, to re-interpret everything that had happened before in the life of Jesus. (The Transfiguration is not an event we interpret; it is an event that interprets everything else.) He was there at the creation of the world; he was part of the creation of the Sacred Valley in Peru and every other awe-inspiring sight that has ever motivated the religious impulse. He was there, in some mysterious way, when Moses met God on the mountain, back in Exodus. Elijah and the prophets spoke for him. The child, Jesus, the man, Jesus, is God himself. Peter, James, and John see that. "The Lord is King; let the people tremble." And they trembled. A natural response to an encounter with God is sheer terror.

We may find such a notion as the Transfiguration a pre-modern bit of mythology, what with our modern sensibilities and understanding of natural processes and general skepticism. But we think too highly of ourselves. First-century Christians found it outlandish as well. That's why Peter writes this second epistle, which can be summarized something like, "No, man, true story. I was there. I saw it. And not just me: James and John were there, too. Three witnesses. It really happened. I was there." It isn't mythology. None of it is mythology.

We see how it isn't just another mythology because of what happens next. The disciples have fallen to the ground. (Sheer terror; a god who can create can also destroy.) Jesus approaches them, touches them—the hand of God touches them—and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." Do not be sheerly terrified. The God—who is the only God, no golden calves—who creates also saves.

Epiphany starts with the question, What child is this? Epiphany ends with the answer: this child is God. The natural response, then, is to make sacrifices, but this God is different than we thought, different than the Incas thought.

As Lent begins, we see that a sacrifice will be made. As Epiphany ends, as the Transfiguration ends, as Ash Wednesday approaches in a few days, Jesus begins his journey to the Cross, and he himself will make the sacrifice that is called for. It will be the final sacrifice, the last blood sacrifice, the last human sacrifice, so that there should never be another one again. God himself makes the sacrifice for the creation that he could destroy, but instead saves. “Get up and do not be afraid.” Do not be terrified.

It turns out that what we should be in awe of is not, at root, God’s power. God is not like us, just bigger; he doesn’t wield his power the way we wield ours. What we should be in awe of is God’s love. His power is not, so to speak, the starting place. It is there, certainly. But it is the testimony in figures in the Old Testament, in story and proclamation in the New Testament, in the traditions and witness of the Church, that God’s very being is love. There is nothing behind that, or prior to that, including power. God’s very being is not power; it is love. The God who created the Sacred Valley and could destroy it is a God of perfect love.

This is what the Incas didn’t know. (It’s not their fault; no one told them.) If I had been standing there with one of them, like I imagined, the best thing I could have done is said, “The one who created all of this loves you. Do not be afraid.”

This is the good news. This is the good news you have heard. It isn’t a cleverly devised myth; Peter saw it. What child is this? He is the God of love who bleeds and dies for you.