
Grounding the Glory of the Mountaintop

Matthew 17:1-9

Mack Wilberg is the infamous composer and director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And in 2014, I got his cell phone number. You have to understand just how big a deal that is. First, you must know that Mack's musical compositions have acquired worldwide fame, and serve as the centerpiece of the famous Mormon Tab music program, which itself is unrivaled across the religious music world. 2014 was the year my twin girls were born. And on a cold Wednesday night in February, while I was in the middle of choir rehearsal, a member of my choir in Raleigh, NC flagged me down and said, "Mike, check your phone messages!" Katie had been trying to get ahold of me, because Elsa and Lavender were going to be born weeks earlier than anticipated—that very next morning.

As their extremely excited adopted parents, we frantically flew out on the earliest flight we could get heading to Salt Lake City. There, in the Jordan Valley Hospital, their birth mother—who we affectionately call *our hero*—gave birth in an induced labor to two of our greatest joys. We had never been to Utah and we left home back in NC not knowing where we would be staying or how long we would be there. Katie's Dad was acquaintances with Mack Wilberg through their shared work as church music composers, and reached out to him about this young couple that was coming into town—if there was any way for him to make us feel welcomed, given we'll have no family around us for this momentous occasion.

Now, I was also church musician, so I knew who Mack was. Benjie, Katie's Dad, said, "All you have to do is go to one of their chapel services, Mack will be expecting you." So, early in our stay we made plans to go to one of the Mormon Tabernacle chapel services to hear the choir and orchestra perform live and

possibly meet Mack. What we didn't know was that the Mormon Church is quite serious about their bodyguard-like protection of its leaders. And as soon as the chapel service ended, we naively walked to the front of the domed tabernacle, expecting to see Mack milling around, shaking hands. After all, that's how they did it in the Baptist church! But Mormon servicemen in dark, pressed suit jackets were already lined up across the front of the platform ensuring no one would be interacting with the performers, and certainly not their esteemed director.

So, far away from home, emotionally spent, and in the throws of this massive change that was unfolding in our lives, we sheepishly mention to the one guard who actually made eye contact that we were there to meet Mack. "Mack doesn't meet people after the program," he said with authority. And after going back and forth, the gentleman finally agreed to go backstage and talk to Mack for us. "Go over and stand by that door. If he's expecting you, he'll come out over there." By this point, I felt like the cowardly lion visiting the great Oz.

We waited and sure enough, out walks Mack with all the smiley welcome that his bodyguards lacked. I remember it feeling like a warm blanket. For this young couple, surrounded by the foreign wintry landscape of Salt Lake City, to know someone was expecting you and looking out for you. After talking a bit with Mack, he gave us his cell phone number on the back of a business card. We thought it was nice gesture, but were later assured by others that Mack doesn't give out his number to anybody. Even Benjie has to write handwritten letters just to get in touch.

Maya Angelou once said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." I can't tell you what the choir sang that morning in that chapel service or the words of the polished narrator. I couldn't even tell you exactly what our conversation was with Mack, but I can tell you that I will never forget how I felt—greeted as family, so far from home, and in a time of great vulnerability.

How are you making those around you feel? Seriously, take a moment and do that mental exercise. "How do you make others feel?"

This is a good for me to do from time to time. As one who has spent years reading and studying theology, philosophy, culture, and investing myself as a lifelong learner, I place a high value on words. Words construct worlds.

I think the truth of what Maya Angelou said plays out in what we do here in worship. After some time, you won't remember my sermons, or even the liturgy or music, but you will have an internalized snapshot of the way it all made you feel. It is all-the-more-true for our children and youth, isn't it? They aren't going to recall what was said or sung on a particular day, but they will carry with them a feeling about church, about church-goers, about their Sunday School teachers, and the whole experience. *How* we tend to this, is an investment beyond the language we are teaching them.

We were raised to diminish feelings, as wild and uncontrollable, and so unreliable, yet we are *feelings* people before anything else. We internalize things before we rationalize them. We embody experiences before we make a mental summary of them. I have to remember this as a minister, but also in all of life. Thinking of how I am making others feel is a way of grounding me in the valley of my encounters with my neighbors.

Every now and then, it's also important to head up the mountain. In this morning's text, Jesus models again the importance of getting away and recharging, reconnecting, by way of reordering priorities. He will often do this: Going alone to the garden to pray, separating himself from the crowds, getting in boats to push away from the shore. When Jesus goes up the high mountain, Peter is also there with him, along with disciples James and John. They have a life-altering experience. Jesus is transfigured, but so are the three disciples by the whole experience. That word, *transfigure*, according to the dictionary means "to transform into something more beautiful and elevated".

Impulsive Peter, after seeing Jesus transfigured and glowing in the presence of Moses and Elijah, suggests a plan to pitch tents for the three of them so they can just stay there and not leave the mountain. With no smartphone to build out a photo album of the experience and upload it to the cloud, Peter intends to just stay in the experience, literally setting up camp in the clouds. When he suggests this, crickets. The silence created by Jesus's lack of response to Peter's constructed plan offers us, the readers, a moment to pause and interject our own confessions. We've been there too. Peter is all of us, in our longing to control what happens on the mountaintop and linger there far too long.

We too have that impulse to setup camp . . . maybe that's with a particular set of beliefs about God or the world, with the way church should be (its style, or ministries, or its leaders). Our mountaintop can be any number of things:

Maybe we drive our stakes down for a particular political view, or an ideal of what a safe and thriving school should look like for our kids, what a proper citizen should act like, or what it means to be *good*. And we grasp at the uncontrollable to try and systematize our world, which is only human to do.

Indeed, it's important to occasionally return to the mountain to do this work, to open ourselves to being changed, even transfigured, again and again. But the glory of life is not in mountaintop experiences but how we live it out in solidarity in the valley. At some point, we have to dissolve the campsite and move back down the mountain. We have to let that which we've driven our stakes down into always be in *service* to people—be it beliefs, ideologies, convictions, opinions.

Peter misses this, as Peter is prone to do. In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, it was the "very next day," after leaving the mountain, that Jesus with his disciples encounter and heal a demon-possessed boy. Talk about leaving the mountain and right into the valley! And then just a few verses later the disciples are immediately arguing over who is the greatest among them, their heads back in the clouds.

Jesus tries to ground them again by gesturing to a child: "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest." (Lk. 9:48)

We remember that in ancient texts, there were no chapter and verse numbers to chop up the flow of these stories. They would have read these pericopes seamlessly from one to the next, from mountaintop glory right into solidarity in the valley. "Discipleship is not separation from the world, Peter, but deeper presence within it." The mountain is not an escape from *presence with others* but preparation for it. We have to be reminded that the purpose is never elevation—but *incarnation*.

The power of proximity. Often, being clergy, I'll have folks ask me for advice on what to say when they are tending to someone who is going through a difficulty or tragedy. What words of comfort should they share? I remind them that most times, simply your presence alone is enough. Help them know that they are not alone. Sit with them in the mess of their difficulty. A mantra that I have come to live by is that the only hope for people to change, for true transfiguration, is through *proximity*. And I've seen this play out enough times to know it as truth

for me. Change comes from proximity and never separation. Separation merely reinforces our echo chamber that doesn't allow us to get into new spaces that will ask us to reevaluate ourselves, our beliefs and practices.

So, I ask you: What is the mountaintop for you? What has perhaps transformed you at one time but maybe has reached its expiration date in the valley? What have you been clinging to, that at one point felt so life-giving but has turned toxic to your growth? What mountaintop heir do you carry which makes it challenging for people around you to feel cared for?

Mack Wilberg and I are bound together. Not because I have his cell phone number—which if I looked hard enough, I'd find somewhere in my keepsakes—but because he is also an adoptive parent. The expectation, the day I met him, was for him to remain on his own mountaintop: After all, this is a couple he knew nothing about, not even members of his own church, and he's a sought-after icon. And yet he chose the gift of solidarity and presence. Little does he know just what that gift meant to us. A few years ago, on a return trip to Salt Lake City—at the invitation of Mack to come and be a guest for the dress rehearsal of their epic Mormon Tabernacle Christmas Concert—I was able to tell him just what that encounter did mean to us and share updates on my girls.

The gift of proximity and presence *with*. May all that we encounter on the mountain be in service to how we make people feel down in the valley. That is the glory of transfiguration. That is how people are changed. May it be so.