



SUNDAY SERMON
ON A MOUNTAIN – 1 KINGS 19:11-12 AND MARK 9:2-7

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I was reared in a Buddhist family tradition in Japan but happened to become a Baptist follower of Jesus in my youth as a result of an encounter with a Baptist missionary from the USA. Historically European originating Baptists have been classified as a sect of separatists. Perhaps a Baptist tradition may go farther back to Abraham. He must be a pioneer or a prototype of a Baptist. How? When “there was an argument between the keepers of Abram’s cattle and the keepers of Lot’s cattle, Abram said to Lot, ... let us go our separate ways: if you go to the left, I will go to the right; or if you take the right, I will go to the left.” (Gen 13:7-9)

Today, I will speak in the manner in which a Baptist preacher is likely to deliver a message. Today’s lesson comes from First Kings chapter 19 of the Former Prophets and from the Gospel of Mark chapter 9 as well.

Who is Elijah? As all we know well, Elijah is a prophet who is expected to herald the messianic time. Elijah is a fighting prophet who resists the arbitrary and sinister power of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He is also a fierce prophet. He killed the 450 prophets of Baal at the stream of Kishon whom he had defeated in a religious struggle between God / Yhwh and Baal (1 K 18). On a visit to Mount Carmel in Israel I saw the fierce statue of Elijah with a dagger in his hand lifted on high.

Elijah is not only a fierce but also a frail and scared prophet who fled from Jezebel’s threat to kill him (1 K 19:2-3). His flight was far enough to reach Mount Horeb / Sinai after his walking for 40 days and nights. Why did he go to the mountain of God? Did he desire to be like Moses?

On Mount Horeb / Sinai Elijah anticipated that God would reveal himself to him in the midst of thunder, storm, burning fire, shaking of the earth and the sounding of a horn just like Moses had experienced (Ex 19:16-19). He found, however, that God was not there in the midst of all these epiphany-like phenomena that Moses had experienced. Instead he heard not a horn sounding, but ‘a still small voice’ after all these revelatory happenings had passed before him (1 K 19:12). The Hebrew phrase ‘a still small voice’ is difficult to translate. Its literal translation may be ‘a voice of thin silence’. Which sounds like an oxymoron and paradoxical! Does it mean that silence is an entrance to the encounter with God? Or does it even give a clue for a dialogue with Zen Buddhists who practice meditation in silence? But here I can only say that Elijah has experienced an alternative means of revelation to that of Moses.

According to the words of Malachi, the last book of the 12 Prophets, we know that Moses is the authority for the Torah tradition and Elijah is that for the prophetic tradition: “Keep in mind the

law of Moses, my servant, which I gave him in Horeb for all Israel, even the rules and the decisions. See, I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes, that great day, greatly to be feared." (Mal 3:22-23).

Elijah and Moses are juxtaposed in the verses in Malachi as equal authorities. As authorities in their own traditions, Elijah and Moses also share a definitive encounter with their God on the mountain from which their authority derives. Their similarities can be seen also in the mode of their deaths which are equally full of enigmas. Moses died while "his eye had not become clouded, or his natural force become feeble." (Deut 34:7). Nobody knows where his grave was located because God buried him (Deut 34:6). On the other hand, Elijah has gone and dramatically disappeared because God has taken away him to heaven (2 K 2:11). He was not confined by death.

The Greek Bible tells us of a new authority who emerged. The Gospel of Mark tells us about the transfiguration of Jesus on a high mountain: his clothing became shining. Which reminds us of Moses the skin of whose face shone (Ex 34:29-30). The three disciples, Peter, James and John witnessed the transfiguration. However, the location is not clearly identified.

According to Mark 9:2-7, it is to be noted that Moses and Elijah came together (now they finally encountered one another!) and were talking with Jesus transfigured on the mountain. Then the disciples heard a voice out of the cloud (*a bat qol*), saying, "This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am well pleased; give ear to him."

The disciples experienced a different means of revelation on the mountain. No thunder, no storm, no burning fire, no shaking but witnessing the transfiguration. They now see in Jesus a new authority for a new spiritual tradition to be established. How then do the disciples give ear or relate to other authorities and spiritual traditions such as Moses' and Elijah's? They were left in ambiguity.

According to the Gospel of Luke Moses, Elijah and Jesus were talking of the death of Jesus which was about to take place in Jerusalem (Luk 9:31). Therefore there must have been not only a great sympathy and understanding but also respect and trust for each other in their dialogue on the mountain.

This year, Mount Fuji, the highest mountain in Japan, has been selected as a "cultural" rather than a "natural" heritage site. According to UNESCO, Mount Fuji has "inspired artists and poets and been the object of pilgrimage for centuries". Mt. Fuji has been a holy mountain among people and therefore several Shinto shrines are located on the starting points for climbing it as a kind of entrance to the holy place.

Our Haus Ohrbeck has been and will be the entrance to a high mountain. I am very happy to be at the Bible Week again and witness a great endeavour and practice to respect and learn from each other.