***“My Holy Hill”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 23, 2019

**Psalm 2:1, 5–6 (King James Version)**

1 Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? . . . 5The Lord shall speak to them[:] 6“Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill.”

**Matthew 17:1–8**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

You’ll notice that I’ve included Psalm 2 in the King James Version. That’s where you hear the odd and interesting phrase “Why do the heathen rage?” The heathen rage when they are focused on their campaigns of plunder. That carries a lesson for us, if we ask ourselves: why don’t *we* rage, that is, why aren’t we *at least* as focused on our spiritual calling as they are on their pillaging? That’s all the wisdom I can inject into that passage. I will be paying more attention to the line “I have set my king upon my holy hill” (Ps 2:6), an image to which I will return after looking at the gospel.

In the gospel story, we see Jesus taking his inner circle of three apostles with him up a mountain in the Galilee, where he is transfigured, and dazzles with a special light. He is also joined by two shining heavenly figures, whom the evangelist and Peter assume to be Moses and Elijah. And here, just as at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, a heavenly voice speaks, saying “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased,” but it adds an important additional command: “listen to him!” (Matt 17:5).

The disciples are terrified and fall on their faces. Jesus comes by and touches them and says, “get up and do not be afraid.” His heavenly companions are gone, and he is back to normal. What are they to make of this experience? Jesus gives no explanation, and in fact tells them not to speak of this experience until after his resurrection.

So, does God place his anointed one on his holy hill, as Psalm 2 had said?

I think so, although new meaning, obviously, is given to both “the anointed” and a “holy hill.” For the person who wrote the Psalm, this means God placing the Hebrew King upon Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It is a political and nationalist concept. In the New Testament, Jesus is the anointed, and the hill is simply the location of his self-disclosure and of God’s pronouncement. Jesus is publicly affirmed as the beloved Son on a high hill, by the voice of God. It was not a holy hill until the Transfiguration *made* it a holy hill, and if you visit the Galilee today, the locals will point out the Mount of Transfiguration to you.

The Transfiguration is a deliberate revelation of the Son’s divinity, backed up by the Father. Now we know that Jesus, in his preaching, rarely focused on himself, but instead on *spiritual* truth and values like trust and sincerity toward God, and kindness and service toward one’s fellows. Nevertheless, the message he delivered *does* include some information about himself. Evidently, we need to know something about the divinity of the Son. Down through time, Christianity has tended to *over*-emphasize that point, at the expense of the message about spiritual living and the transformation of believers, which often gets treated as secondary. Still, it seems that God intended that the divinity of the Son would be part of the gospel message.

The voice from heaven tells the apostles where to get true knowledge: by listening to the divine Son. The disciples will long ponder in their hearts this amazing revelation on the hill. Possibly it made them listen to him even more closely. Without a doubt, their experience of witnessing the self-disclosure of Jesus and his affirmation by God helped to strengthen their faith, but it does not actually replace the teaching of Jesus. It is simply an addition, a cosmic support, for the timeless truths that Jesus revealed. The command “*listen* to him” tells us that his *teachings* are really important. We have tended to exalt him, to lift his name on high . . . and *miss* half of what he is saying! No. We should *listen* to him, and *study* him. No miracle takes priority over the teaching.

Let’s look at the teaching. What he says to the apostles here is “Do not be afraid” (17:7). Of course, you have had times in your life when you were afraid, maybe other times when you were lonely. Those feelings subsided when you got back on track, and resumed trusting Jesus. If you are confident about your decision to trust, then you will have no fear about this life or the next. Jesus said: “In my Father’s house are many dwelling-places. . . I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). He wants us to trust there is a way prepared for us in the afterlife. Be not afraid.

If we really have faith in God, it will not be shaken even by our intimate awareness of the dangers, disappointments, and harshness of material life. We will learn to trust that “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:4). We know that there is much suffering down here, and we pray that people be relieved of their heaviest burdens. We believe Isaiah’s report that “in all their distress he too was distressed” (63:9 NIV). Whatever we are going through, God knows our affliction. We pray “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10), and we seek to bring more of heaven down to earth.

Jesus is your pilot. Trust that he is steering you a-right. Focus on his teachings, and you can also reverence his character and recognize that he is the anointed one, affirmed by God—both on a hill in Galilee, and in your life experience.