

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In this seventh part in the series Elaine Wainwright focuses our attention on time, location and the permeable space between human and holy in the story of the transfiguration in Mark 9:2-8.

Elaine Wainwright

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there

appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him. ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus!”
NRSV. (Used with permission)

The story we name the “Transfiguration of Jesus” has a number of features that invite us to read ecologically.

time – six days

The narrative begins with a very explicit time designator: six days later. Had we been first-century listeners to the Markan story-telling, we would have had ears attuned to details such as the “six days” reference that we, as contemporary readers, tend to miss (we can always go back and re-read, so we are not as attentive as those early listeners would have been). The “six days” seems to link this story back to the previously located event, which was when Jesus and the disciples visited the villages in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27). There, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the *Christos*, the anointed one, the liberating one, the one engaged bodily with the poor and the suffering — touching bodies and taking and blessing bread. But Jesus immediately introduces another aspect of his unfolding role as *Christos*. It is that he will suffer bodily degradation caused by leaders who are threatened by the way he lives out his appointed task as God’s anointed (Mk

8:31-32a). Jesus will face death as all Earth-beings face death — but his will be a premature death visited on him by other human hands.

place – up a high mountain

Having noted the time explicitly in the opening phrase of Mk 9:2, the ecological reader will be attentive to the grounded place in which the narrative is located: up a very high mountain. Habitat and human are intimately connected here as the narrator recounts Jesus’ taking of Peter, James and John with him up this “very high mountain”. This seemingly simple description encodes layers of meaning in the narrative texture of the text. The materiality of the “mountain” holds the reader’s attention initially, an engagement that would be very familiar to New Zealand readers from their own experiences of a “high mountain”. Its materiality is near the surface of consciousness.

At a second level of meaning-making, the mountain can evoke for readers Moses’s journey/s up the high mountain of Sinai (see Ex 24:15–18) and hence the mountain as place of

encounter with the divine, the Holy One. Both layers of meaning play in this text.

seeing and experiencing

The senses give access to what is material. The sense of “seeing” functions powerfully in this particular scene. The disciples have to “see” Jesus to know he is “transfigured” before them. The translation of the verb *metamorphoein* as “to transfigure” can tend to obscure the sensory experience. A dictionary explanation “to change in a manner *visible* to others” (*italics mine*), evokes the bodily sense of seeing. Jesus is changed in a manner visible to the three disciples and yet this change is one that is more than human: his garments became glistening, intensely white in a way unknown to human experience — “as no fuller on earth could bleach them” is the Markan phraseology. The evangelist grapples with language that will articulate the change that the disciples “see” and “experience”. The human and the holy intersect in the materiality of the body and of the clothing of Jesus transfigured and this is “seen” by attentive disciples. The space between

the human and the holy is permeable.

The verb *horaein* “to perceive by the eye” in Mk 9:4 continues to evoke the material sense of seeing or perceiving. The verb is in the passive and carries the connotation of “appeared” or “made an appearance in a transcendent manner”. Two “holy ones” from Israel’s history, Moses and Elijah, are speaking with the transfigured Jesus. They too experienced transformative encounters with the holy (Moses in Ex 24:15–18 as noted above and Elijah on Horeb, 1 Kgs 19:11–15), encounters that took place in their bodies. All these transformations occur in a grounded/earthly space — on a mountain. Indeed, Peter seeks to capture this extraordinary experience, to “earth” it in “three booths”, rather than to let it function at that point of radical intersection between the human/earth and the holy. Peter is “exceedingly afraid” in the face of such radical intersection. On the other hand the text invites us as readers into such a space.

hearing and listening

The materiality of the mountaintop experience continues as a cloud overshadows the group while a voice from out of the cloud confirms the radical intersection of human and holy. The voice engages another of the senses, that of hearing. Its very invitation is to listen — to listen to him/Jesus. He is the one who is named by the voice as the beloved of the Holy One.

place, human and holy

As the scene comes to a sudden close (Mk 9:8) the sense of seeing is once again evoked, linking human and habitat. In the grounded context in which transfiguration took place, the three disciples see no one but “only Jesus”. The final verse in Greek concludes with the phrase “with them” — they no longer see anyone but only Jesus with them — still on the high mountain. The extraordinarily subtle interweaving of habitat, human and holy together with the evocation of the senses in this short



Mount Tabor

narrative functions as an invitation to ecological readers to an encounter with just such radical intersection.

need ecological reading

We are encouraged in such ecological readings of our sacred story by Pope Francis. In his recent encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* he offered the following challenge: “If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and *no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it*” (par 63).

The scriptures, our sacred story,

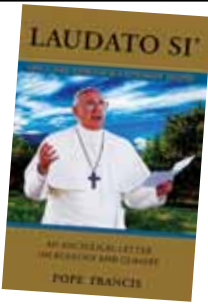
are one “form of wisdom” and are included in “religion and the language particular to it”. As we attend to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, we are invited to hear our sacred story anew, particularly to hear the voice of Earth in the many voices rising up from various habitats. Thus, we will, continuing in the words of Pope Francis, attend to our “Judeo-Christian tradition” in ways “which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent” (par 15). ■

Elaine Wainwright RSM is Professor Emeritus University of Auckland and an independent biblical scholar.


Laudato Si’

**(Praise Be to You):
On Care For Our Common Home**
An encyclical letter on ecology and climate
By Pope Francis, (Author)

Possibly one of the most important encyclicals of our time, Pope Francis addresses humanity’s relationship with the natural world in *Laudato Si’*. The Christian and secular world have been captivated by the papacy of Pope Francis, and this encyclical has drawn huge attention globally to the critical ecological and environmental issues facing us all.



\$14.99 +\$4.50 p/pkg



\$4.99 +\$4.50 p/pkg

Misericordiae Vultus
*Bull of Indiction of the
Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*

Freephone 0508 988 988
order@pleroma.org.nz
38 Higginson Street, Otane
Central Hawke’s Bay
www.christiansupplies.co.nz