

Exod. 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-36

Worship on God's Holy Mountain

The Rev. Patrick S. Cheng*
Metropolitan Community Church of Hartford
February 18, 2007

Good morning! It's wonderful to be back at MCC Hartford and to celebrate the Lunar New Year with you today. The Chinese words for "Happy New Year" are *xing nien kuai le*. Can you say that with me? Turn to your neighbors and wish them *xing nien kuai le*.

For many of us who are of Asian descent, this is a time to come home and gather with family and friends to celebrate our common heritage. For me, coming to MCC Hartford is very much like coming home. This is the third year that Michael and I have been with you for the Lunar New Year, and it's great to see so many familiar faces – as well as new ones. It's also very exciting for us to be with you in your new worship space.

Today we celebrate the Year of the Pig, which is year 4,705 in the Chinese calendar. You are a pig if you were born in 1995, 1983, 1971, 1959, 1947 or 1935. (You might be a pig even if you weren't born in one of those years, but we won't go there.) Are there any pigs out there?

According to East Asian astrology, people who were born in the Year of the Pig are loyal, determined, and very kind to their loved ones. They don't talk a lot, but they enjoy studying and learning about new things. They can be quick tempered, but they don't like to argue or quarrel. Celebrity pigs include Elton John, Lucille Ball, Morrissey, David Letterman, and Hillary Clinton.

There is something wonderfully queer about pigs and the Christian faith tradition. If you think about it, pigs are completely despised in the Bible. The Book of Leviticus forbids the eating of pork or the touching of pig carcasses, because pigs are seen as unclean creatures. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah condemns the Ancient Israelites for rebelling against God, which includes their eating of pork.

Even Jesus doesn't like pigs. In Matthew, he tells his disciples not to cast pearls before swine. In Mark, Jesus exorcises a demoniac and sends the unclean spirits into a herd of pigs who run off a cliff and drown in a lake. And in Luke, the low point of Jesus'

* Copyright © 2007 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

parable of the prodigal son is when the son runs out of money and is forced to feed pigs for a living.

And yet, isn't it odd how we never hear fundamentalist Christians condemning people to hell for eating the "other white meat"? The last I heard, bacon, sausage, and pork chops are still pretty popular. I suspect this is because God came to Peter in a dream and changed the rules as to what is clean and unclean in the Acts of the Apostles. But I've never understood why this change should be limited to food. To me, it applies to *anything* that was once considered ritually unclean by the Ancient Israelites, such as LGBT people. With God, anything is possible. So go forth and embrace your inner pig!

I could go on endlessly about inner pigs, but unfortunately there are no pigs in today's readings from Exodus and Luke. There are, however, lots of mountains, and that is what I'd like to talk to you about today. As you may have noticed, both of today's readings are about encountering God on a mountaintop. The first reading is about Moses coming down from Mount Sinai, after he has encountered God face to face and received the Ten Commandments. Because Moses spoke to God directly, his face shone brightly, and he had to cover his face with a veil whenever he was among the Israelites.

The second reading is about Jesus' transfiguration. In that reading, Jesus ascends a mountain with his disciples Peter, James, and John in order to pray. While they are up there, Jesus' face and clothes become dazzling white. The disciples see him speaking with Moses and Elijah, and they hear the voice of God identifying Jesus as the Chosen One.

Both readings, in the words of the Psalmist, are about worshipping at God's holy mountain. Although this might be the first time that some of you have thought about the connection between God and mountains, this theme actually appears in a number of places in the Bible. In fact, whenever you hear about a mountain in the Bible, you should fasten your seatbelts because it's going to be a bumpy ride.

Mountains have a special place in the Judeo-Christian tradition. That's not surprising, because that's the place where the Ancient Israelites believed that human beings could encounter God. For example, the Garden of Eden was said to have been located on a mountain. Noah's ark rested upon a mountain after the Flood receded. God spoke to Abraham and told him not to sacrifice his son Isaac on a mountain. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, as we heard in today's first reading. And Zion, the new Jerusalem where Gentiles and Jews will one day worship together, is located on top of a mountain.

This connection between mountains and the divine also appears in the New Testament. Early in his ministry, Jesus overcomes the temptations of Satan on a mountaintop, where he is shown all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus is transfigured on top of a mountain, as we hear in today's second reading. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus ascends a mountain when he needs to pray, to get away from the crowds, and to teach his

disciples. And finally, after the Resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven from Mount Olive.

Have you ever encountered God on a mountaintop? For some of you, that may be way too butch for your tastes. The closest you'll ever get to a mountaintop is Julie Andrews singing and spinning during the opening credits of the Sound of Music. (Or, for those of you who are slightly more butch, you may experience mountaintop bliss through Ennis and Jack's touching relationship in *Brokeback Mountain*.)

I'm not that butch, but I have certainly felt God's presence on a number of mountaintops. One such place for me was my summer camp when I was growing up in Northern California. Although the Boy Scouts continue to deny that gay people are fit to participate in their movement, I sure learned a lot about morality and values, including a deep sense of spirituality, during my time as a camper and staffer at Cutter Scout Reservation in the Santa Cruz mountains.

Another place where I have encountered God's presence is Acadia National Park in Maine. Michael and I have spent a lot of time hiking there over the years, from Bubble Rock to Cadillac Mountain. There is nothing more amazing than climbing to the top of a mountain and looking down on God's creation and marveling at the beauty and vastness of the earth, particularly when you are next to someone who you love.

I recently came across a website for a lesbian inn and resort in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which Planet Out called "one of the most romantic destinations on the planet." I suspect that one of the attractions for the resort – which calls itself "a lesbian paradise" – is the fact that there is something transcendent about being in a mountaintop community of women who love each other and who share similar interests.

God's presence is not limited to physical mountaintops, however. Like Peter, James, and John, many of us have encountered God at key moments of our lives – moments in which we say "Aha!" and recognize some deep truth about ourselves. I suspect that one key moment for most of us is coming out. Many of us know for a long time that we are somehow different from other people, but it isn't until we receive a flash of insight that we are able to label ourselves as being gay, first to ourselves and then to others.

One key mountaintop experience for me was attending a Lunar New Year service at MCC New York in the late 1990s that was organized by Susie and Arnie, two Asian American friends of mine who were members of the congregation. It was the first time in my life that I realized that I could put it all together – being gay, being Christian, and being Asian American. For once, I didn't have to choose what part of me was most important, because God loved me for who I was. What started as a single worship service resulted in a small email listserv, which eventually turned into Queer Asian Spirit, a world-wide network of LGBT Asians of faith and our allies.

For me, a ministry like Queer Asian Spirit is not just for people of Asian descent. It allows *all* of us to embrace our ethnic identities, whatever they might be. Belonging to a minority ethnic group can often be a source of stereotyping and shame, both within the LGBT community as well as the larger culture. We are programmed by society to think that “fitting in” is good – we don’t want to come across as different. Fortunately, we are struck with a mountaintop moment every now and then in which God breaks through. We realize how the qualities that make us different – including race, ethnicity, and culture – are in fact a gift from God to the world in which the amazing diversity of God’s creation and love is revealed. This is something we learn, for example, when we celebrate Black History Month in February.

What are some mountaintop experiences for you? Where have you encountered God on God’s holy mountain? As we celebrate the beginning of the Year of the Pig, I encourage you to embrace not only your inner pig, but all of the wonderful characteristics that make up who you are. Know that you are loved by God, and share that good news with all who you encounter. *Xing nien kuai le!*