

Until the mid-1700s, Europeans avoided the mountains at all costs. Mountains always have been unpredictable and dangerous places, places of fog and mist, avalanche and volcanic eruption, of lung strain and altitude sickness, and for Europeans, for centuries, the mountains were absolutely not a place you'd choose to go. Even from an aesthetic perspective, the mountains were thought to be hideous, with their jagged-y crags and precipices, their sharp, irregular jutting spurs and deadly crevasses, they were unsightly abominations, a blight on the landscape. Travelers through mountain passes would actually avert their eyes to avoid having to experience such a horrendous assault on their senses.

Perception is everything.

Until that perception changes. In the mid-1700s, there was a massive shift in perception, as philosophers, artists, and theologians all started to consider the mountain in something of a new way. Nature was being re-examined, beauty was being re-defined, wildness was being re-considered.

There was great interest in the human 'psychic' response to all those things in nature that evoke some kind of fear – like a rushing cataract in a river, or an immense towering cliff face. Folks were starting to notice, that alongside the rush of fear that comes with being faced by something in the natural world that's entirely too huge or too powerful to fully comprehend – alongside any feelings of fear, there was also a hint of something pleasurable.¹

¹ For a really great read that speaks to all this, please see: McFarlane, Robert: *Mountains of the Mind: A History of Fascination*, (Granta Books, London: 2003)

This was the idea of the sublime: that something intimidating in scale, uncontrollable, or intensely powerful would inspire a heady cocktail of terror and a kind of excitement. This feeling was described at the time as having an enlightening effect, of *stretching* human experience. It was a turning point for perceptions in Europe;

... having once shunned the wildness of wilderness landscapes, folks now sought out the intensity of experience freely available in wild places.

The bodily encounter with natural power on this scale can be exhilarating, overwhelming and cognitively threatening; it holds our own physicality and mortality right in front of us, and that feeling can be so paradoxically good, in its visceral affirmation of life.

These days, though, most of us experience only worldly power, and that, in a very different way. We live in a society that doesn't much like acknowledging there's anything, in heaven or on earth, with more power than it has. This dominant culture we live in insists that all things submit to the might of the highly educated mind. Ideas become managed and manipulated, our experiences explained. Mystery is all but stripped away. Living in these days in this culture, we're encouraged to believe that nothing is too big, too vast, too powerful to be controlled, or owned. Our mighty minds are now well trained to reduce all things to a manageable size; we have no time for revelation, for incomprehensibility, or for ancient embodied wisdoms ... this society of ours has no time for anything that's inefficient or unproductive or unprofitable.

Perception is everything.

In a world that trains us to look for efficiency and productivity, in a world like this, what then do we do with our ideas about God?

How then do we understand the role of prayer, or what we're doing here when we worship? What role does scale play in our spiritual lives, the sublime, in a world that perceives only measurable output as valid or worthy.

Despite it being largely ignored, the sublime, thankfully, remains ... and with it, the possibility of actually experiencing the scale of being it affirms. The sublime, if we let it, still calls for a response from all that we are: our senses, our whole nervous system, our hearts, muscles, and minds. The sublime can draw us out of our cultural moment, it can alter our perception.

The sublime, with its exhilarating terrors, affirms the expansive truth and massive dimensions of life in this world – and, for us as Christians, the sublime reminds us that the power and the glory, *true* power and *true* glory, are of God alone.

The sublime draws our attention to that which is always there, the scale of that which is always there, but we struggle to notice, amidst the noise and junk of everyday life.

Our 21st century habits of thought and perception would have us shrink down and reduce the scale of what we do here on a Sunday, just as we all too often shrink down the scale and power of God; so they can be ideas we can manage and have some sort of control over in our minds. But ideas that have been tamed, scaled down to be held easily in the mind will pose little to no threat to the worldly systems that are running amok, that celebrate and uplift worldly power, that have us notice only a scale of wealth. Because perception is everything.

But, what we do here on a Sunday is a threat to those systems.

The Eucharist isn't just a worship service, or 'one of the sacraments' – Irenaeus of Lyon said in the 2nd century that “where the Church is, there is the Holy Spirit and the fullness of Grace.”² The Eucharist isn't just a worship service, it's the “*fulfilment* of the Church, in all [its] power, sanctity and fulness.”³

This isn't an idea that can be tamed by the mind, it's an experience to be known by the being. It's a response to the sublime, to the sheer scale of grace.

My invitation to you and to all who may be called, is just this: be receptive - allow yourself to be surprised by the fullness of what's happening here, when we come together for Holy Eucharist; encounter the sublime, and you will be changed.

My invitation to you is to do nothing more than be receptive to the full force and sheer scale of the presence of God. With intention, and with practice, our response to the immense and irreducible power and truth of God will catalyze our response to the worldly powers being wielded around us, transforming us to speak out a prophetic word, to be healers and to be repairers of the breach.

My invitation to you, and to all who may be called, is to be receptive to the Eucharist as a full-bodied and living experience, as an exhilarating encounter with God, as on the mountain-top, as the sublime. Be receptive to all the feels, tremble even before the sheer scale and force of the mystery of it all. Bring your whole self here, your senses, your whole nervous system, your hearts, muscles, and minds, your whole being as we stand together, as One body, transformed and transfigured before God.

² Schmemmann, Alexander *The Eucharist*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York: 1987), 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 24

I truly believe the Eucharist is the fullness of the God-infused reality into which we are all called, a call so easily drowned out by the noise of the world we live in.

The Eucharist is power! It's wisdom and thanksgiving, repentance, forgiveness, and healing, here we offer our own lives, completely, as Jesus offered his, and we become one in him. The Eucharist is the power of new creation, truth in God, and hope in Christ. It's huge, or it can be.

Because perception is everything.

This place can be our holy hill, our place of revelation and radiant transfiguration, our place to practice and be transformed. And all we need do, is show up and be open to it all.