



land
of my
sojourn

X

X

the landscape
of a faith lost
and found

mike cosper



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Land of My Sojourn* by Mike Cospers.
Copyright © 2024 by Mike Cospers.
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

1

Mount Tabor

*Light at the Summit
or Glory at Mount Tabor*

The Hebrew calendar follows the cycle of the moon, not the sun, adjusting to follow its syncopated twenty-nine-and-a-half-day rhythm throughout the year—twenty-nine days this month, thirty days that one, and so on. The years expand and contract too. Some years add as much as a whole month.

The modern Hebrew calendar is calculated mathematically to ebb and flow over several years. Before that the beginning of a new month came at the first actual visual appearance of the new moon. When spotted, someone would send word to Jerusalem where religious leaders would confirm and announce the beginning of a new month.

At the sound of a shofar, according to the Mishnah, “they used to bring long poles of cedar and reeds and olive wood and flax fluff which they tied to the poles with a string, and someone used to go

up to the top of a mountain and set fire to them and wave them to and fro and up and down until he saw the next one doing the same thing on the top of the second mountain; and so on the top of the third mountain” (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:3).

You may have encountered something similar in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. To summon aid, beacons are lit in Gondor and then from mountaintop to mountaintop, calling the men of Rohan to war. The message moves, more or less, at the speed of light.

For Jews the beginning of the month is known and celebrated as Rosh Chodesh, and while it’s a minor holiday, it plays an important role—which is particular in the ancient Near East, where tracking the phases of the moon wasn’t a precise art. By officially recognizing the new month centrally, in Jerusalem, it kept Jews throughout the diaspora in sync on high holy days—Purim on the fourteenth of Adar, Passover beginning on the fifteenth of Nisan, and so on.

Rosh Chodesh is also associated with resilience and renewal. From Abraham onward the Jewish people experienced seasons of flourishing and suffering, but just as the moon waxes, wanes, and returns, their survival has too. Like Rosh Chodesh itself, the flames of the beacons were symbols of hope and renewal passed from generation to generation, mountaintop to mountaintop.

Southwest of the Sea of Galilee and east of Nazareth is a mountaintop that is believed to have once been the site of such a beacon. Today, this alien-looking half-sphere that rises above the Jezreel Valley houses not one but two monasteries. In the first

Mount Tabor

century the mountain was called Itabyrium. We know it today as Mount Tabor. And we remember it not because of the long-forgotten beacon but because of another event that took place here—another eruption of light that signaled a new beginning for God’s people.



The first time I saw Mount Tabor I was just outside Nazareth on Mount Precipice, where an angry mob once tried to throw Jesus off the top of it. On the day I visited, the skies were a surreal, shimmering blue. Broad cumulus clouds hung in the distance, flattened atop warm air from the Jezreel Valley as though they were melting on glass. Mount Precipice isn’t particularly high, but the valley is so flat and sprawling that the view gave me a sense of vertigo. Gideon battled the Amalekites at Jezreel, and it’s been the site of wars ever since—as recently as the First World War.

When I stood on Mount Precipice, the Jezreel Valley stretched below, and Nazareth was to the right, stacked up the Galilean hills. Mount Tabor rose to my left, and I could immediately see why it would have made a perfect site for a beacon. It’s what’s known as an *inselberg* or an island mountain, the result of colliding fault lines driving a lone mound of rock up from the surface. Jeremiah saw its solitary, commanding presence as a metaphor for the coming of the Messiah, who would be “like Tabor among the mountains” (Jeremiah 46:18). Psalm 89 imagines Tabor as a singer, joining Mount Hermon to praise God. The choice of these two peaks isn’t arbitrary; Hermon and

Tabor were contested spaces and scenes of desecration, “high places” where idolatry and evil infected the Holy Land and spread to the cities and valleys below them. The psalmist was reminding his listeners that God had staked his claim on these places, and they were meant for his worship.



It was about three years into Jesus’ ministry. While the other disciples were in the town below, serving the crowds that had gathered because of Jesus’ arrival, Peter, James, and John joined Jesus on a hike up Mount Tabor.

By now this trio had been established as Jesus’ inner circle, and I wonder if their closeness to Jesus gave them some anticipatory sense that something was going to happen as they ascended the mountain. Nevertheless, when they reached the top, Jesus began to radiate white light, shining brighter and brighter until he became difficult to see. Then, suddenly, he was not alone. He was flanked by Moses and Elijah, talking with them like old friends.

Imagine living in a place where an evil empire has either crowded out or corrupted all of the spiritual and cultural values that you hold most dear. Imagine spending your entire life hearing stories about generations past, when similar crises of politics, culture, and spirituality had troubled your people until right was restored by mighty prophets and warriors. Imagine hearing that another warrior would come and do it again someday. Now before you two of these mighty men of old reappear alongside your rabbi, a man who you’ve seen command demons and perform countless

Mount Tabor

healings, feed five thousand people, and walk on water. If there was any doubt in your mind that Jesus was going to carry the mantle of heroes past and lead a revolution to restore your people, it was gone now.

The place where this happens speaks volumes too. As mentioned, Mount Tabor overlooks the Jezreel Valley, which may be one of the most blood-soaked landscapes in human history. Contested again and again for its incredible fertility and its strategic importance. Through a mountain pass to the west lies the Mediterranean Sea and rich trade. Go north from Jezreel and you can get closer to the sea but you lose the fertile land. Go south and it's rocks and crags for miles. East is desert. Jezreel was a precious place.

Wars have been waged there since at least the fifteenth century BC, documented in the Hebrew Bible. In the stories of Deborah, Gideon, Saul, Jesus, and Josiah. Moses and Elijah themselves fought in it or for it as well. An ancient city sits in the pass to the sea like a gateway. Many of these wars converged on that city; control the pass and you control the immense wealth that can be cultivated in a wide swath of the Fertile Crescent. That town is known as Tel Megiddo. We derive the word *Armageddon* from that name.

Like the beacons lit at the start of the new month—notably the darkest part of the lunar cycle—Jesus' transfiguration into a beacon of light must have overwhelmed Peter, James, and John with the announcement of something new—a new season, a new hope for the people of God. Flanked by the prophet-warrior who

conquered this land in the first place and another who later cleansed it of idolatry, no scene could confirm more deeply the hopes of Jews like these three men who longed to see Israel restored to its former glory. That restoration was their heart's desire. They'd anticipated it all their lives.

Peter seems to have been the first to find his words in this holy moment, and they rush out as if from a child who can't hide their feelings. I think Eugene Peterson gets at this best in his translation *The Message*: "Master, this is a great moment!" (Matthew 17:4).

The next sentence is the most revealing. "If you wish," Peter says, "I'll make three shelters for you."

Some see Peter's eagerness as a profound error. He's putting Moses and Elijah on level ground with Jesus. I'm skeptical of that interpretation. I don't think he's making a theological statement or judgment. While Peter is often impulsive, I think a better way to see him is guileless. He can't hide or contain what he's thinking and feeling. There's passion at his core, and it often takes the driver's seat.

So, Peter can hardly process the scene before him: the radiance of Jesus and the presence of these heroes of faith. All the while he feels minutes and seconds slipping between his fingers, feels the presence of the other disciples waiting below, feels the lingering shadow cast by Jesus' earlier prediction of his death.

"This is a holy moment," he says, desperate to make it last. "Let's set up camp."

It's a childlike request: "Can we just stay here?"



Mount Tabor

On September 11, 2000—a year before that date would become infamous in American history—I woke up to my phone ringing at about 7:30 in the morning. I was exhausted and sore from the combination of physical labor and stress that had filled the day before, and I wasn't happy about waking up.

On the other end of the line was my friend Jeremy. We'd been close for years having served in a variety of music ministries together at churches, camps, and retreats. We'd also played in a couple of bands together. Jeremy was a worship leader, and I was the music director at the time at Sojourn, a new church plant in Louisville, Kentucky. He'd been part of our core team for the first few months. His brother had been one of the founding pastors. But Jeremy left in February when his brother's marriage ended, wisely choosing to step back into his home church for some stability as they rallied around his brother and processed grief. We still were close friends—he was engaged to my wife's best friend; we just hadn't served in ministry together in a while.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Sleeping,” I said.

“Can you meet me for breakfast?”

I was working as a barista at the time (planting a church does not a full-time salary make) but happened to have this particular morning off. “Sure. Where?”

“Dooley's Bagels?”

I agreed and got out of bed to head to the bakery. I was sore all over. The day before had been the second of two planned preview

services for Sojourn, with the launch scheduled for next Sunday, September 17. We were renting an old church in the Highlands neighborhood in Louisville, and they were incredibly generous to us. Their sound system, though, wasn't prepared to handle the demands of a full band, and they had no available storage, so all of our speakers, amps, mics, drums, and instruments were down the road at an art gallery Sojourn had opened. In might sound unusual for a church plant to launch an art gallery ahead of regular services. It was, but that was who we were. In any event pulling off a Sunday service meant packing three to four truckloads of gear, hauling it a couple of miles down the street to Highland Baptist Church, loading it all in, calibrating it, rehearsing a band for a couple of hours, leading the service, then breaking it all down and hauling it back. The process started around noon, with a service at six, and we finished unloading back at the gallery around 10:00 p.m. We didn't have many hands on deck that particular weekend, thus the sore, tired body.

I was mentally exhausted too. This imminent launch stemmed from the almost chance meeting of a few different pockets of like-minded believers. Jeremy's brother had been a youth leader at a mainline Christian church in the area, but his students were having trouble feeling authentic (a big deal, especially to young people and especially in the late 1990s) in a rather straight-laced setting: wearing T-shirts of their favorite bands all week and putting on a polo and khakis for Sunday. The youth group made contact with another group of young believers coming out of Louisville's underground and punk scene and began dreaming up

a church that sounded and looked like them but was rooted in the gospel. The addition of an energetic church planter from the Southern Baptist seminary in town helped open doors. This church planter, the lead pastor, was a gifted speaker and had a way of rallying people, especially people who were hungry for something they could call their own. So, the Sojourn launch in September 2000 was the fruit of a lot of searching and a lot of hard work.

For the months leading up to the church's launch, we'd been struggling to figure out who our worship leader would be. I was music director but didn't sing. (I never have.) Jeremy left in February and another of our potential worship leaders left too. A third moved to Nashville. Another to Philly. That summer, a young guy showed up with his guitar to a Wednesday night Bible study and blew us away. He was a natural leader from the platform and drew out our little gathering into loud, joyful singing.

For the next several months he and I worked together on those Wednesday nights, choosing songs and talking about arrangements with the bands. By September 3 we were firing on all cylinders. The kid was naturally gifted to lead from the front, focused on the congregation and the singers who'd join him on stage. I was leading the band, dialing in arrangements, trying to push our sounds and ideas into creative territory that felt more like a native language to us. We'd established a musical fingerprint that was dark and reverent, which was a pretty stark departure from the sound of contemporary Christian worship we'd all grown up with but resonant with our hearts and sensibilities.

I think it's hard to overstate the importance of the musical shifts of the early 2000s to people who didn't live through it. The baby boomers had built churches that looked like casinos and convention centers, and the contemporary worship music that came from Orange County hippies in the 1970s had evolved into a highly polished genre all its own. The big hits at the time were songs like "Shout to the Lord" and "Shine Jesus Shine." It may have served its audience, but it was a radical disconnect for Gen Xers like me who were listening to the angsty rock of the 1990s. The previous generation had contextualized hymnody into their 1970s aesthetic. We were ready to take another leap.

To walk into a church in the year 2000 and find a room full of young people dressed mostly in black, with a stage full of candles and loud guitars, where the music was mostly in a minor key, was a serious dose of culture shock. But for people like me, it felt like we'd come home.

The day before Jeremy called me, our last preview service before launch had been a bit of a disaster. It began to unravel about midway through setup when I noticed our worship leader wasn't there.

I tried calling his house. I think maybe he had a pager, and I think I called it too. Thirty minutes passed. Call again. We started rehearsing the songs that another singer led. Called again. An hour late by this time. I started adapting the musical set and figuring out who else could sing. Cut this song. Change that key. The keyboard player sings this. Jen sings that. I even sang one myself. It was the only time in fifteen years I'd ever sing at a Sojourn

service. No recordings exist. At quarter till, as people were making their way in, I finally made peace with the fact that the guy just wasn't coming.

It would be twelve years before I heard from him again.

It turns out he went on to a successful music career. He moved to Nashville, was nominated for a Dove Award, and later became a worship leader at several large churches. We had a pretty good laugh about his disappearing act. We were all young—him especially—and God had done a lot of good in the intervening twelve years. But that preview service ended on an unsettling note.

And then the phone rang the next morning and I headed to Dooley's Bagels.

I think of this story often because it reminds me of how easily things might have been different.



Jeremy and I sat in the dining room surrounded by the black-and-white checkered tile and the noisy morning crowd. He had an ear-to-ear grin and was excited that I saw in him, from time to time, a kind of childlike joy that I've always admired.

"I had a dream last night," he said.

"Okay," I said.

"Have you seen *Being John Malkovich*?"

Being John Malkovich—a wonderfully weird Charlie Kaufman–Spike Jonze film in which John Cusack discovers a portal into the actual John Malkovich's mind.

"So, in this dream, we all went to see *Delirious*."

Delirious is a British band that wrote and recorded a lot of the worship hits of the early 2000s, like “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever” and “Majesty.”

“Okay,” I said.

“And while they’re playing, we get invited backstage after the show. Someone randomly gives us passes.”

“All right.”

“And we show up in this room backstage. And the band’s there and other people are there and we’re milling around, but it’s super dull. There’s just concrete floors and walls and the lighting’s dim and there’s a folding table with two-liter bottles and some bags of chips on it. And then suddenly someone points out this little door, hidden under the table.”

“Like the portal in *Being John Malkovich*?”

“Precisely, and Martin Smith [from Delirious] is like, ‘Let’s see where this goes.’ So, we all start lining up and crawling through the portal, and then it turns into a slide kind of thing, and we’re all kind of falling through it, but it’s not scary or anything. Everyone’s excited. And then it dumps us out into this incredible mountain lake. There are cliffs all around us and the water is warm and the sun is shining, and it’s just perfect. And we’re all astonished too. Like, we know how weird it is that we’ve been transported there. And people keep saying things like, ‘Can you believe this is here?’ And ‘How did we get here?’”

Jeremy’s not the most charismatic person in the world, and by *charismatic* I mean prone to this sort of vision or dream, or to speaking in tongues or anything that one would be tempted to call

Mount Tabor

prophecy in the contemporary sense. At the same time we were all kind of charismatic-adjacent then (and maybe still are) because of experiences we'd had as worship leaders. While this sort of conversation wasn't an everyday occurrence for us, it also wasn't something either of us would have greeted with total bewilderment.

“So, we're swimming around,” he said, “and at some point Martin Smith comes up out of the water right in front of me, and he looks me in the eyes and he says, ‘Can you believe we almost missed this?’ And I woke up on the spot and just knew, in my core, that I needed to come back to Sojourn.”



This memory is funny to me. It's vivid, though I'm not sure it felt like a powerful moment at the time. It was just kind of interesting—more of a *hmm, okay* moment than a *wow*. But I also didn't have any doubt about any of it. Jeremy is one of the most honest and sincere people I've ever met. A sense of calm settled in me. A feeling of confidence that things were unfolding exactly the way they were supposed to.

We launched our first official service as a church that following Sunday. In the years that followed, Jeremy and I have led more worship services together than we could count, and he's written and recorded dozens of songs. Sojourn Music never became a household name, but we did connect to a broader movement of church-based music that would emerge in the next decade. Because of that, Jeremy's songs are sung in hundreds of churches across the country and in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia.

I can remember on that first Sunday, in particular, singing a brooding version of Michael Pritzl's "Light of the World." Jeremy and I had probably played it a hundred times before in various settings, but that night it felt different. There was something new about the way the snare drum and the reverb-drenched electric guitars echoed off the limestone. Candles flickered off windows depicting prophets, apostles, and saints from church history. This stained-glass cloud of witnesses surrounded about seventy-five people, almost all wearing black T-shirts or hoodies. Some sang. Some scowled. Some stood cross-armed with the same stoic cool I'd seen on their faces at indie rock shows in crappy venues around town. But they were here. A gang of punk rock ragamuffins who'd felt out of place at most of the churches we'd attended. We'd found a home.

We named the church Sojourn, a nod to a song by the poster child of ragamuffins, Rich Mullins. It was born out of deep friendships, years of wandering, and months of intense work and prayer. We worshiped together in a shared cultural language, as though our liturgy had finally been translated from Latin to our native tongue. Music was key—an aesthetic that tied us together—but there was so much more. Something in seed form that I imagine is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he talked about the spirit of a beloved community.

I still feel a part of my heart clench when I think of the light in that darkened room in the early years of the church. I can close my eyes and find myself there instantly. See the candles casting flickering shadows. Feel the creaking of the wooden floors. Hear

Mount Tabor

the whispered prayers and the music. I understand why these kinds of experiences are often referred to as mountaintops. They elevate the soul.

I completely understand Peter's response there at the top of Mount Tabor. When you encounter glory, you desperately want to make it last.

Can we just stay here?

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/land-of-my-sojourn