

On Hiding Spires in the Fireshaft

*Then Herod called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I also may go and pay him homage."
(Matthew 2:7-8)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Epiphany Sunday, **January 6, 2019**
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Did you ever as a kid play “*King of the Mountain?*” For boys in my neighborhood “*King of the Mountain*” was a choice contest of muscle and brawn. Most any pile of dirt would suffice, an invitation to stake claim to the top as play companions sought to knock, pull, drag, or wrestle us off.

Let me tell you about an architectural version of “*King of the Mountain*” played out on the concrete battlefield of Manhattan during the late 1920's. The challenge? Building the world's tallest skyscraper. The contestants were Chrysler in Midtown and the Bank of Manhattan on Wall Street. Just as in Matthew's Epiphany narrative, trickery plays a key role in this *King of Skyscraper Mountain* contest. The stakes were enormous, so it's no surprise that secret blueprint revisions



were common. At last, though, Chrysler “*threw in the towel,*” announcing that they would not bring any more materials into the construction site. The game was over.



George Orwell once said, “*The quickest way to end a war is to lose it.*” Chrysler seemed to have conceded. The Bank of Manhattan would now have, unchallenged, the highest stack of metal in the world. “*Congratulations,*” Chrysler was saying in a show of good sportsmanship, “*You've won. You are the King of Skyscraper Mountain.*”

So the Bank of Manhattan triumphantly crowned 40 Wall Street with a fifty-foot flagpole, a coronation of sorts. But, wait. Another construction crew is punching their time cards over at Chrysler. Are they reneging on their promise? No. True to the precise wording of their pledge, they didn't bring

any more material to the construction site. Still, Chrysler was about to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Actually, they pulled a *Spire Out of the Fireshaft*. During construction an 18 story spire, 185 feet tall, had been secretly constructed inside the building in four pieces and hidden in a fireshaft. When they hoisted it into place on October 23, 1929, the Chrysler building became the tallest skyscraper in the world, the first ever to top 1,000 feet.

Hiding Spires in the Fireshaft. Congratulating your opponent as you concede defeat so convincingly that your opponent relaxes while you await precisely the right moment to play your clandestine ace-in-the-hole. Matthew's story of the infamous King Herod tells of his attempt to do just that. "*Congratulations, you eastern Magi! Your Epiphany is equally an Epiphany for me. I, too, wish to see! Go, search diligently, and . . . please come back to me so that I, too, can worship him.*"

Well, it doesn't take a Ph.D. from Baghdad University to recognize Herod's duplicity. Matthew says a dream warned them not to believe Herod, but I doubt they needed a dream. Surely they suspected that a bending of the knee was not on Herod's to-do list. He had a shiny spire hidden away in the fireshaft of his towering speech, a flashing sword of jealous wrath readied to slay any child whom the people might see as a fulfillment of ancient messianic prophecy. Herod would, at all costs, maintain continued eminence as *King of Judean Mountain*.

King of Judean Mountain was a game played 1000 years earlier by Israel's first king, Saul. Prior to Saul the Hebrews were a loose-knit confederation of tribes. Periodically, in crisis, God raised up a leader with enough moxie to be a uniting force coalescing the clans for a common purpose. These were called judges, their stories told in the Old Testament book of Judges.

While the system of judges limped along, the people wanted more, comparing their judges to surrounding kings and judging its judges to be, well, a rundown office building standing next to towering, shimmering skyscrapers of Egypt's pyramids and Babylon's palaces and hanging gardens. "*We want to be like other nations whose political structures are taller. We need to modernize. We've entered the 11th century B. C., after all! Let's not hold ourselves back with 12 century B.C. thinking.*"

So God chose Saul, the Bible describing him as "*head and shoulders*" taller than the rest. With Saul, Israel stood tall, stood proud. The first *King of the Judean Mountain* towered above the rest but, as usually happens in this game, another's star was soon to shine brighter. Even the Chrysler building's stature as the world's tallest skyscraper was eclipsed in the short time of eleven months by the Empire State Building.

That brighter star outshining Saul was David, the shepherd boy of Bethlehem. With the slaying of Goliath, David's reputation grew. King Saul overheard a group of women chanting with surging national pride as in a political rally, "*Saul has slain his thousands. David has slain his tens of thousands.*" Talk about poll numbers slipping! It disoriented Saul, making him first angry, then a bit crazy.

The Hebrew idiom reads, "*It burned Saul very much.*" Saul's jealousy drove him to derangement as he played "*King of the Judean Mountain,*" pulling a spire out of the fireshaft when he threw a spear at David twice, trying to pin him to the wall.

I suppose we play *King of the Mountain* in virtually every realm of human life, not just architectural or political. What happens when someone comes along at your school or at your job who seems a little smarter, a little more talented? It takes a mature, self-confident person not to feel threatened when one comes along whose star shines brighter than our own.



In 1969 at the University of California Berkley, a student under stress to perform felt himself falling behind. Everybody seemed to be getting ahead of him. One day, he went berserk under the strain, running through the library shouting hysterically at students, “*Stop working! Stop working! You’re getting ahead of me!*”

Thirty-four years ago, in 1985, I was hired as an administrator at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, shown below. I gave many tours of that church, and often those touring requested that I take them into the attic. Why? That attic was made famous in the 1950s in one of the most bizarre stories in Ann Arbor’s history, the story of Cheng Lim, an exchange student from Singapore. He had enrolled in 1952 at the University of Michigan, sponsored by the United



Methodist Church. Three years later, in 1955, he went missing. He had been distressed due to low grades, feeling he had dishonored the people that had brought him to top of the academic mountain. He walked to the nearby Huron River and threw his passport in, hoping it would be found and that it would be assumed he had committed suicide.

He hadn’t. Later that night he went to the church and climbed a ladder leading to an attic.

There he stayed for four years, living in the cramped space, at nighttime sneaking down to the kitchen for food and water.

His years of seclusion ended on August 30, 1959, when the police received a call of a prowler at the church. They had responded to many such calls at the church, never finding anything missing other than some likely misplaced food items in the kitchen, hardly a capital crime. This time, though, an officer glanced Cheng’s hand as he disappeared into the attic. Pursuing, he discovered, behind a trap door, a makeshift bed and a box of crackers. The officer then shone his

flashlight down a four feet deep hole in packed insulation, where he discovered Cheng Lim rolled up into a ball, hiding.

Cheng Lim's story was one of self-imposed exile, shamed that he had failed his family and the generous Methodists who had given financial aid. *Better for them to think I'm dead.* The story gained national notoriety, published in newspapers and magazines across the world. Local businessmen in and beyond the church created a fund to help him resume his education. The government reinstated his visa and the university permitted him to enroll again. Lim graduated in 1961 and went on to obtain his master's degree.

When Sgt. Olmstead retired from the Ann Arbor police in 1990, my 5th year as the church's administrator, he recounted his amazing story of one night finding this student who had failed to reach the top of the academic mountain to which he aspired, wrapping himself in ball shame. It is a story with a good ending.

Gore Vidal must have been young, not old, when he wrote with more than a tad of cynicism, "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little." Yes, surely young to be so filled with what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure received when others with whom we are competing slip and fall. Surely young, I think, for who hasn't gone to their first high school reunion hoping they are at least a smidgen more successful than their friends?

Tracking high school re-unions is worthy of a PhD dissertation, if you ask me. "What impels people to go to them?" Willard Spiegelmann asks in *The American Scholar*. At the 10th reunion, age 28, old sores may still ooze, old animosities simmer, old flames yet burn. *King of the Mountain* is still being played, so that checking out how others are doing in comparison to yourself is as obvious as it is politely hidden. At the 30th reunion, age 48, one has reached maturity with a judicious combination of contentment and acceptance of one's path. At the 50th reunion, no one now cares to ask "What are you?" They ask, instead, "How are you?"

We spend some time every day of our lives looking in the mirror -- washing, shaving, putting on make-up. Every morning we look pretty much the same. Then you see a photograph of yourself on your wedding day or in a college basketball uniform, and it stops you in your tracks to ask, *When I did become old?* We are, oddly, at any age, both the same, and not the same. It's been said that we spend the first half of our life wishing we looked like someone else, and the last half of our lives wishing we looked like ourselves in the first half of our life.

And what of the 60th reunion at age 78 and the 70th at 88? Well, as Voltaire once said, after 80 years old, all contemporaries are friends, knowing where they are going, that they are going there both alone and together. Ah, the perspective of age, a leveler of all the mountains to which once we so breathlessly aspired and so gallantly sought to conquer.

Stephen Covey, author of the 1989 bestseller *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, contrasts "abundance mentality" with "scarcity mentality." Those with a *scarcity mentality* see life as a finite pie, so that if someone gets a bigger piece of the pie, it means less for them. Therefore, recognition of others is perceived as diminishing one's own success, like Saul's dismay over David's "tens of thousands" compared to his measly "thousands."

Those operating with an *abundance mentality*, on the other hand, set no limits to opportunities for success, either in themselves or in others. They are not as likely to be moved to anger or fear when someone else's star begins to shine brighter. These are more apt to experience an inner calm and peace in the place of the raging protectiveness which stakes its claim on the mountain it seeks to claim as its own.

This Table of Holy Communion invites us to an *abundance mentality*. For 2,000 years this loaf has been broken into pieces, millions and millions and millions of pieces, each one equally a part of the Body of Christ. This Holy Table is one of abundance, not of scarcity, a table where we all receive and rejoice in the Kingdom of God within the world.

May God even now give us grace to receive of his abundance, and to step forth to share his abundance. Amen.

