

Sermon: February 7, 2016 (Transfiguration) – Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

An open letter to the Mountains:

It doesn't feel like I've known you very long, and I don't know you all that well, but I feel compelled to write you a letter to let you know everything you mean to me.

I remember when we first met. I was a wide-eyed kid from Saskatchewan, riding in the back seat of a 1965 Meteor, and I couldn't believe how big and stark you were. I'd seen other Mountains in the theatre or on TV, but they were genteel with green meadows and blue skies. You were just BIG and HARD and GREY and in your ruggedness you impressed me beyond words. I was filled with awe.

We next met when Shannon and I made the trek from our flatland home in Regina to live among the mountains and waters and trees of Vancouver for our seminary years. By now I was growing more conscious of where and how I felt the Holy Presence of God, and for me that was mainly in the blowing grasses and grains of parkland and prairie...so it took a while for me to befriend you. I met others who could not imagine living away from the mountains, where they felt the imminence and excellence of their creator, and I could tell how much they loved their history with you, even if it was not my own. I admit even to this day that my heart's home may not be here, but that does not lessen my admiration of who you are and what you provide.

For the past twenty years I've lived nearby, occasionally visiting with you for family walks or the occasional inept days on downhill skis, and for three years I have lived in your embrace. 125 years ago a young schoolteacher and Churchwoman named Minnie Fulton wrote this about the people who chose to call this place home: "Canmore is a glen with mountains on every side. One wonders how they ever got in and almost doubts that they can ever get out. From the foothills on one side to the foothills on the other, it is almost as flat as the palm of one's hand" and for this prairie lad that description works pretty well. You mountains are there, framing each picture-perfect gaze in every direction, yet you give me my space. You make the perfect backdrop for this lovely little Church without muscling in on us. I like having you there.

As one gets to know a new friend a bit better, one of the side benefits is that their friends become my friends. And on that note, I need to give a special note of appreciation to you mountains of the Bow Valley.

You invite the world – athletes from twenty-eight nations have come to this very town, right now. We have athletes and coaches and spectators and all manner of other tourists, and what a gift that is. You bring the world to us, and draw from us the gift of hospitality as our horizons are expanded by these guests from away.

You are a magnet for the most interesting people. This is a place where people come to drink deep of the magnificence of creation. You encourage us to be active, you draw us into the fresh air whether it's accompanied by the warm breezes of summer or the crunching snow of winter, sometimes on the same day! And within the towns that are nestled in your midst, we find such deep commitment to the causes of the world: development and education in Africa and Latin America, environmental education and advocacy, literacy classes for newcomers from all over, willingness to help a Syrian family start a new life. And don't get me started on this Church – we'd be here all day talking about the gifts that this faith community has given and received from its mountain locale, right back to the coal mining days.

And perhaps best of all, when it comes to the new friends I have met through you: you give safe haven to wildlife, you teach us to respect the first claim of bighorn sheep and mountain goats, elk, cougars, bears, ravens and eagles, whitefish and trout, larch and aspen and crocus and bunchberry. Never have I lived in a place where there was such honest respect for these neighbours, an understanding that they were here first and our decisions need to adjust to that, not vice versa. May we never take for granted these wild ones, your best friends forever.

And in addition to appreciating the new friends that these mountains introduce me to, I must say, Mount Lady Mac, Three Sisters and EEOR, you re-set the size of my problems. When I am overwhelmed by deadlines, when I am stressed by tasks that need to be done and tasks that simply aren't going to be done, I step out onto the sidewalk and look at your immensity and recall how ancient you are, and I feel a

little bit embarrassed at how dominant I allow the small things to become. Or even better, if I truly escape the tyranny of tasks and find the time to traverse your trails, even a little bit, and from that vantage point look back at my worries, I see their relative magnitude. From the more accurate viewpoint of a mountain, the enormity of my trials and tribulations become barely a speck, in the vastness of time and space.

You mountains that surround us and support us are true gifts to us. Shannon wondered aloud about three years ago, how long it would take for you great grey sentinels to change a person and all I can say is, it started pretty much immediately.

The more I get to know my mountains, the more I am drawn to address all mountains. The lessons I learn here may not be exactly the lessons that other mountain-dwellers learn; the relationship I have with these mountains here may not resemble what others experience, at all. And in this, we remember the stories of others, two of which we heard this morning.

Mount Tabor – or was it Mount Hermon, there seems to be some question as to the location – I want to talk with you about that Transfiguration day. Clearly, you are one of those “thin places” where there’s no distance at all between the life we live, and the realm of holiness. On your slopes, the first disciples experienced timelessness, a wrinkle in time when the unseeable became seen, the unhearable came to be heard, the unthinkable came to be understood, and yet the unspeakable remained unrepeated. On your primeval slopes, Jesus’ companions connected to the beliefs of the ages, they felt the very presence of Moses and Elijah. On your slopes they heard and saw things that changed them from merely trusting the words and goals of their amazing rabbi friend, Jesus, to sensing that in his person and actions and thoughts, they were seeing God’s own ways unfolding in the flesh. In your glory you opened their eyes to God’s glory, as so often happens when we are in the presence of mountains.

Mount Sinai, your holiness is so deeply embedded in our history and yet we may miss how turbulent things were at your foot. We hear the ancient stories of faith, of God’s self-revelation in the clouds, of etched tablets containing the words of life, of Moses literally beaming with holy radiance, yet we may forget the rest of the story. The same people who yearned for guidance and a sense of belonging waited about ten minutes and when Moses wasn’t right back started seeking an easier, more tangible way, bowing down to idols rather than trusting in the one whose ways are mysterious, whose presence is enigmatic yet utterly to be trusted. Sinai, you are the venue where we are claimed by God and rebel against God simultaneously. You grant the gift of rules to keep us safe and we turn our back on those rules, simultaneously. And because you are a place where we figure out who we really are, we recall you with particular reverence, and offer to the Holy One our hopes and prayers for those of all faiths who live in your shadow, whose struggles, especially these days, are beyond our comprehension.

And as we stand close to the journey of Lent, we cannot help but think of Mount Zion, the home of the very Temple where Jesus had such eventful days, and Mount Calvary, that euphemistically named garbage dump where he was killed by crucifixion. The apex of religious life and the pinnacle of human cruelty have been enacted on mountains.

And as we address the mountains of our sacred story, we recall the importance that mountains have held for others. We bring to mind our sisters and brothers of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain faiths, and their sacred story of Mount Meru, “a mythical mountain with its roots in the underworld and reaching up through all levels of reality to the heavens.” We acknowledge the holiness of Mount Arafat, where Muhammad preached his final sermon. And we open ourselves to the legends of our first nations sisters and brothers, who have been your stewards over the ages, speaking of you as companions of our journeys and ancestors of our days.

And we pray for all who turn to Mountains for pilgrimage. Whether it is Jewish, Christian or Muslim pilgrims are heading to the Middle East, Buddhist or Shinto pilgrims ascending Mount Fuji, or Navajos returning to Kachina Peak for spirit quests, purification or initiation, many seek Divine light on mountaintops. Many others find deep life fulfilment on challenging climbs, of Everest and K2, of Kilimanjaro and the Matterhorn. And some cannot live without the thrill of the riskiest climbs or the quickest downhill descent. May all who seek depth as they ascend you, do so with safety, and find what they seek in life.

In all of this, O Mountains, you reveal to us the very glory of God. We bring to mind favourite hikes or climbs, mountain passes and vistas. We recall hard-earned places that have been challenging to reach

and have taken our breath away, literally and figuratively, and we recall how these times have brought us close to God's timeless presence. We recall the sounds of wildlife when we've been on your trails: the scurry of pikas and marmots that have amused us, the call of songbirds that have amazed us, the evidence of predators that have frightened us. We recall artwork, photos, films and memories that have dazzled us with the immensity and beauty that only our creator could even conceptualize.

So many people, especially in the Bow Valley, say they meet God in nature more than in any other place; and rather than seeing that as competition to what we do in gathered community, I wish to express gratitude. In traditional religious life it is easy to let our relationship with the Divine slip into a system of reward and punishment, but the holy world of nature reminds us how much of life is beyond our explanations and our capacity. Your grandeur, O Mountains, shakes me up and makes me think of God's glory, not just what God can do for me or even through me. You mountains give me pause to think of holy majesty, and that is a good thing to ponder.

In closing, dear Mountains, your size is beyond measure. Your age is beyond my comprehension. Your welcome shelters and nurtures plants and animals of all varieties. Your height and breadth and seeming aloofness is breathtaking and alluring. In all these things, O Mountains, you draw me to recognize and sing praise to the glory of God, the creator of all, the author of existence itself, and for that I give my humble thanks. Amen.

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Today's Call to Worship is a responsive reading of a sonnet, written by Malcolm Guite

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
 On that one mountain where all moments meet,
 The daily veil that covers the sublime
 In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
 And to that light the light in us leapt up,
 We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
 Nor can this this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/a-sonnet-for-the-feast-of-the-transfiguration/>