

Sermon: February 23, 2020 – Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 24: 12-18 - Deuteronomy 34: 1-5 - Matthew 17: 1-8
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The term, “mountaintop experience”, is a great descriptor for those moments in life that are indescribably grand. After great effort or a long, arduous journey, experiencing the strived-for moment is indeed a “peak” moment. An academic career culminates in an award, a scholarship established in one’s name, or some other great honour. A team’s season culminates in winning the championship, or a veteran player finally wins a championship after many seasons. Nine months of morning sickness and backaches culminate in the safe delivery of a newborn. Whatever the journey, reaching the mountaintop is a wonderful thing.

And whatever the mountaintop experience, the inevitable question is, “what now?” In the case of giving birth, especially to a firstborn, the “what now” is all new and worrisome and possibly sleepless, as the new parent realizes that the child did not come with an instruction manual. Academic success, especially if found mid-career, may well be followed by a return to the “publish or perish” grind, the academic version of “what have you done for us lately?” And I recall Paul Henderson talking about the “what now” in his life: after scoring the winning goal in the 1972 Canada-Russia hockey series, about as high a moment as one can imagine in the sports world, came a sense of discontentment, soul-searching and emptiness, self-examination that opened him to a “born-again” Christian experience and a new venture of men’s ministries.

There are many stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and indeed most if not all religious traditions, set on mountaintops. This morning, we have encountered three of these, two involving Moses, one involving Jesus; three different mountains, three different experiences, but some similarity in what followed the three events.

The first Moses story we heard today, was the giving of the commandments. As Moses communed with God on high, shrouded by cloud at the mountaintop, the people waited down at the foot. As the days passed, the people grew less confident that Moses would ever return to them, and less convinced that putting their trust in the one and only God would be more effective than bowing down before human-made idols.

However you regard this account of Moses at Mount Sinai, literal or metaphorical or some other way, I invite you to enter the story and imagine yourself in his position: having first-hand communion with the living God... given the responsibility to articulate these terms of relationship, to a people who only weeks before had been living as slaves in a different land... then descending the mountain, filled with spiritual energy and a sense of new purpose, only to find that the people had already made and worshipped an idol of a golden calf. Your mountaintop experience, filled with awe and wonder and a whole new sense of purpose, came crashing down, and the stone tablets etched by the finger of God came crashing down too. The glories of the holy mountaintop were followed by the harsh realities of human insecurity.

The second Moses story, is set forty years later, “forty years” being scripture’s way of saying “a very long time of spiritual formation.” The destination of the promised land, the “land of milk and honey” had nearly been reached, and Moses – now well on in years – is led to the top of Mount Nebo to look out over the land. Reach into your own experience of mountain vistas for this one: Machu Pichu, or Kilimanjaro, or Fuji, or your favourite Rocky Mountain peak, or that beautiful landscape at the crest of Scott Lake Hill. After all that he and the people had gone through together, Moses could now see their destination.

Moses could see the promised land, but he would not be allowed to *enter* it. Whatever the reasons for this limitation, the climax of the story, for Moses, would be seeing the land rather than entering it. His travelling companions would enter, and the story of the people would carry

on for generation upon generation, but this mountain vista was going to have to be “good enough” for Moses.

The third story this morning takes place at a location much harder to identify, but for argument’s sake we’ll go with Mount Tabor, up in the north country. This is the moment when Peter, James and John were given first-hand evidence that this Jesus they were travelling with was not like the other travelling preachers of the day: this one, was the Son of God.

Yes, there are problems with this story – it has the sense of being written by a gospel writer shaping the Jesus story after his death and resurrection, and even the term “Son of God” was more widespread than we might think. But again, enter into the space of this sacred narrative, imagining this time that you are one of those witnesses, Peter or James or John. You see Jesus, standing alongside these great figures from your faith history – Elijah and yes, one more time on a mountain, Moses. You hear the very voice of God declaring Christ as beloved, God’s own child. You struggle to know what to do next, wondering if setting up some sort of structure might preserve the moment – an inclination so often followed in that part of the world, with holy places in nature obscured by one commemorative building after another being erected on top of them. And then, when you leave this place, ready to tell the others who have been following Jesus about the fullness of his identity, you are given this directive, by Jesus himself: tell no one. Tell no one, until I have risen.

That might even be more heart-wrenching, than Moses being shown the promised land, but not being allowed to enter into it. At least Moses knew (a) that he wouldn’t have to carry this for long, as his days were numbered, and (b) his travelling companions would have no such barrier. But as for Peter and James and John, they’d have to keep this crucial information to themselves for an indefinite period of time. Every day they would be bursting to share the good news with their closest friends and every day they would have to stay mum about it. The glories of the mountaintop had a strange denouement for this inner circle of Christ’s followers.

In the same way that the Bible tends to present its heroes complete with very human flaws, I am so grateful that our sacred stories include the hills and valleys of human living. In my personal fantasy of how life should unfold, I expect that things will always keep improving and once things reach a pinnacle, I will be able to sit there and bask in the glory. In our world’s economy, built on what climate activist Greta Thunberg so colourfully called, “fairy tales of eternal economic growth,” everyone – or at least the industrialized world – seems to figure they will keep getting more affluent, setting up future generations for unlimited ease. But that’s not how things go in a fair and authentic life or in the stories of the Bible.

Life, we hope, will have its mountaintop moments where we feel at one with God and in healthy relationship with the world, but the time to bask in that, is fleeting. On the road of fidelity to a God whose care is for all people and all living beings, we will always be called to be just and loving stewards of the resources entrusted to us. At the mountaintop, where we can see so far, we are called to internalize that view, far ahead and so tremendously wide, so that when we descend the mountain we remain concerned for future generations *and for those in our day whose needs are seldom considered.*

- The elation and awe of receiving the Ten Commandments was, for Moses, followed by the rage of seeing his people worshipping and dancing around a graven image, breaking the original stone tablets, and then creating a replica of the tablets that would re-commit the people to this covenant
- The fullness that Moses must have felt at seeing the promised land, was in the sad but accepted context of knowing that the land was for his people to enter, but not for him.
- The glories of Christ Transfigured, was followed by an order to his disciples, to keep this knowledge to themselves until the time was right - and once the time was right, they

(and we) are to share without reserve, the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, a sign of God's complete commitment to the liberation of humans from whatever powers oppress them.

Each of us, I suspect, can identify places in *our* lives where this pattern has been in evidence: personal high points, followed by a challenge and, perhaps, a renewed commitment to keep the long, expansive view ahead of us. We may recall these times fondly, or pensively, or it could be that we are in the middle of such a time right now and need reminding that it's normal to have a sag following a high point... and important following that sage, to find a future focused not on personal glory, but on God's horizon line of Shalom.

This pattern also applies to our gathered lives: the groups and ventures we participate in with others and, most specifically, the life we live together in communities of faith. As mentioned at announcement time and in a few e-Newsletters, after worship today we'll have lunch together and I hope that most of you can stay for the workshop to consider how the physical shape of this building can support the present and future ministries to which we are called. This investigation is nothing new – not only have the present wonderings been going on for more than three years, it's always been in the DNA of this congregation-on-Main-Street to look outward at what is needed, in responding to Christ's call to love God and love our neighbours.

I think back in the history of this Church, and wonder what the hopes were for our forebears.

- Back in 1890, when this Church was being built and on January 25th, 1891, when worship was first held within these four walls, it must have been a wonderful thing... but living in a town full of miners of so many nationalities, the challenges would also have been significant. Could they have imagined that 129 years later, this same sacred space would be so vibrant and beloved? Could the multi-ethnic, mostly-male community of coal miners have foreseen anything remotely like the Canmore of the year 2020?
- After World War II, when these lovely memorial windows were installed with the little ring of stained glass around them, when new pews and this pulpit and communion table came in and the floorboards replaced, what were their hopes for Canmore and Canada and a world that had seemingly committed itself to peace?
- When this congregation took the huge leap of faith in 1984, to move the Sanctuary onto a fresh foundation and build Gordon Hall, could they have foreseen how well the building would serve us, landing us at this moment when we will consider what is out there on the next horizon, and what facilities will best serve the needs of the community moving forward, a view that will take into account not only future needs but also present gaps in who can and cannot access the full structure?

I am honoured to place this day within that narrative of faithful stewardship, and encourage you to let yourselves be challenged, as we look at what comes next – both, the things coming right away and the need to equip the people of this congregation to keep reaching beyond themselves in the name of Christ, long after we are gone.

I acknowledge the hesitancy that many are experiencing, at taking on the financial commitment of renovating, retrofitting or expanding this facility so that it supports mission, rather than creating obstacles to mission (see Mission Statement, on screen). But I also want to place that hesitancy in its proper place within our journey with God. None of the scenes we have considered today would have been without worrying and wondering.

- We are told so clearly, that even before they left Egypt, the children of Israel were wondering if they were making a mistake, and every time they could challenge Moses' leadership and vision, they did.

- We know that looking out over the land of milk and honey, Moses was looking at already-inhabited land and that struggle to respect indigenous lands continues today.
- We hear of the glorious vision beheld by Peter, James and John, and to be told to keep quiet about that? I think “hesitant” barely scratches the surface of how much those three wanted to disobey orders and spread the word of Jesus as Lord.

And within each scene of this congregation’s story, there would have been huge misgivings.

- I don’t know how the locals managed to fund the initial construction of this building, given their meagre resources and just a bit of money put in by the wider Church, but I do know that when Rev. Charles Gordon (aka Ralph Connor) left the Bow Valley, he went on a huge fundraising trip to the UK to find benefactors for the mission work out here in the Canadian wilds.
- I know that Doc MacKinnon was a forceful minister here during and immediately after World War II, but can you imagine taking on all the work they did between 1945 and 1950, walls and windows and nearly all the furnishings?
- And I know we have a few first-hand witnesses to the level of convincing and cajoling that needed to be done to convince the 1984 version of this congregation, that a two-floor hall was needed.

Our faith tradition, following the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites and the Messianic Secret that the disciples needed to keep, does not shy away from the tangible worries that travel with us, even when we travel with God. We stand in a fine local tradition, of having to overcome financial worries, in order to be the kind of Church we are called to be now and in future. As was the case in 1890 and 1945 and 1984, some of the building needs facing us are already overdue, and some of the future needs will be very much speculative; both the things we can see and the things we cannot fully see, are things we do in partnership with the God who calls us to engage *not just our own needs, not just our own spiritual growth, but the needs of the community and nation and world around us.* We enter this time of hard work and hard questions, informed by a faith history that still lives within and around us, challenged as previous generations were, *to seek a hazy horizon beyond our seeing* with faithfulness and courage.

We are so blessed by a faith history filled with mountaintop experiences, and to live in a place where mountaintops are not just metaphorical, but part of our surroundings. As we assess what might come next in the life of this lively, committed community of faith in the growing, changing context that is Canmore, we rely as our forebears have, on the God who creates and loves and questions and renews, in all of life’s peaks and valleys. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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