

**Sermon: Transfiguration Sunday, Feb 19, 2023 – Matthew 17: 1-9 and Exodus 24: 12-18
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church– Rev. Greg Wooley**

Jesus. Peter, James and John. A Mountain. A dazzling light. Holy Visitors from the past. A Voice from Heaven. All of these meet, in the glorious oddness of the Transfiguration.

This is one of those Sundays where *our* physical context, nestled into the embrace of these big-shouldered mountains, changes how we understand a sacred story. One way or another, most of us were drawn to this place *because* of these mountains: whether it was for work or recreation or for other forms of engagement in the natural world, the beauty of this majestic landscape draws us here and captures our hearts. School teacher Minnie Fulton, recalling the days of 1890-1892 when the Presbyterian congregations in Banff, Anthracite and Canmore were served by their young Minister, the Rev Charles Gordon (later known as the author Ralph Connor) wrote of his passionate preaching shaped by the words of the 121st Psalm, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. ² My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth”. (Psalm 121: 1-2, King James Version). I can so relate to his passion for those words, for each time I gather with a family at a graveside service ringed by mountains, we share those same ancient words, and have a profound sense of the way that these immense grey sentinels witness and hold the events of our lives.

For thousands of years, everywhere on this planet, people have understood that there is something uniquely holy about mountains. Perhaps it's simply that mountains go way up into the clouds, and if one's religion pictures heaven as being “up there”, then ascending a mountain is like climbing a ladder to the heavens. But there is more to it than that: in the way that the ancient Celts understood some places on earth to be “thin places” where the gap between the human realm and the divine realm was very small, many peoples in many places have understood their sacred story unfolding within the mountains. Rev Dr Chief John Snow, Sr., memorably wrote a book entitled *These Mountains are our Sacred Places*, outlining that for the Iyârhe Nakoda this is not only a “thin” place, there is in essence no separation between secular and sacred – most especially in places like the mountain Îyâ Mnathka, the lake Mini Waka (literally “sacred waters”) and the healing waters of Minhripa.

I'm going to take a few moments, to briefly consider a half-dozen mountains where Divine presence has been evident to people of various religious traditions:

- Mount Olympus – according to Greek mythology, this mountain formed following the defeat of the Titans at the hands of the Twelve Olympian gods
- Kailasa, in Tibet – held sacred by four religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and by the Bon people), the summit of this mountain is considered to be where the Hindu god Shiva sits in eternal meditation.
- El Teide, in the Canary Islands – the Guanches people believed that this active volcano contains the devil Guayota, who was trapped inside by Magec, the god of light and sun.
- Jabal al-Nour, near Mecca, Saudi Arabia – contains the cave where Muhammad is said to have received his first revelation from the archangel Gabriel
- Mount Sinai – the scene of today's reading from Exodus, where God is said to have appeared and spoke to Moses, delivering the 10 commandments.
- And then there is today's gospel reading of the Transfiguration. Strangely, perhaps, no specific mountain is named. Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the region, was closer to Caesarea Philippi, where they had just been; Mount Tabor, traditionally

understood as the mountain of transfiguration, was closer to Galilee, which is the next place they went. In a spirit of fairness we'll give both of them some screen time.

The mountain may not be named, but the companions are. Jesus and disciples are met by two historic figures, Moses and Elijah, two ancestors in the faith whose stories were shaped by mountains. In addition to his experience on Mount Sinai, Moses experienced the burning bush on Mount Horeb, stood on Mount Nebo to see the promised land which his people would enter but he would not. Elijah confronted the prophets of Ba'al at Mount Carmel, and as he feared for *his* life, heard the still, small voice of calm at Mount Horeb. In Israel's sacred story, these two had already established their credentials as "Mountain Folk."

And on this mountain – be it Hermon or Tabor – what happened? Jesus took three of the first four disciples, Peter and the brothers James and John, for some "alone time" on a high mountain and before their eyes, was transfigured. On that mountain Jesus is revealed to them, not only as teacher and companion, but as Christ. Here, I like the wording of the Good News Bible, which leaves aside the more technical religious word "transfigured" and says instead, "a change came over Jesus." I think we have all seen this in someone: by their expression, or posture, or complexion, we can interpret that something has changed for them: they are worried about something, they just received bad news or, on they are joyous or encouraged. Sometimes it's as simple as looking into their eyes but other times it is as though we are seeing their "aura" – there is a sense of gloominess or brightness about them. And when we notice this in a friend, we must acknowledge that this is part reality and part interpretation: they may indeed look different, and we are perceiving them in a new way.

Take that experience, amplify it, and imagine Peter and James and John and what they saw in their companion. "A change came over Jesus," says the Good News Bible, "his face was shining like the sun and his clothes were dazzling white." According to Matthew, *Jesus* had been told of his special connection with God back when he was baptized, but this mountain moment was the time when *his closest confidantes* would be let in on the secret. They had already been wondering amongst themselves, how it was that the words and deeds of this travelling rabbi had such extraordinary power, but this was the moment where the God-connection was made explicit.

For me, as a liberal Christian who grew up understanding Jesus mostly as a great teacher and activist and gatherer-of-people, who taught of radical love and hospitality and had the chutzpa to actually put those words into action (even when that put him into conflict with the powers-that-be) this whole scene is challenging. I am so used to my social activist Jesus that I am overwhelmed by this notion of Jesus as the Christ, ablaze in glory. I am so used to seeing Jesus as an ethical guide, that to see him portrayed in such glorious terms is nearly a cross-cultural experience: I don't really know what I am seeing or what to do with it. Here on the mountain, we come to understand that Jesus' agenda of lovingkindness expresses not just a desire for harmony between people; when Jesus showed powerful love, and when we as the enduring hands and feet of Christ in our time and place do likewise, it expresses the very glory of God.

In both of our scripture readings, something overwhelming happens: Moses is summoned into the very presence of God; Jesus is transformed in real time as his followers watch. And while "overwhelmed" isn't the healthiest word in my spiritual lexicon, I have to admit that it's one of those words that forces me to acknowledge the presence of God. When I am overwhelmed by the immensity of a mountain or the intricacy of a snowflake, I know God in all her creative tenderness. When I am overwhelmed by emotion, by the joy or sorrow or kindness or cruelty

of a moment, the glory of God is glowing in the joy, or breaking through the gloom. Even when I am overwhelmed by the burden of responsibility or the relentlessness of workload, God is basically one deep breath away. Time and again we are challenged by things that are too big for us, emotions too big to handle, worries too big to carry, confusion about the purpose of life that is too big to resolve, and in God we find the imagination and creativity and capacity and courage to not just carry on, but to thrive. In the light of Christ's transfiguration we are let in on a big secret, that our efforts to bring beauty and love and kindness into daily living are expressions not just of obedience to the good advice of Jesus; they bring the very glory of Christ into our daily consciousness. As one who goes about daily life in a pretty workmanlike way, I need reminding that the gift of life, given daily, is not just OK, it is abundant, and transformative, and glorious.

Here in the mountains, in their immensity and in the extraordinary diversity of life that they house and nourish and protect, the problems of my life have no choice but to shrink down to their proper size. Here in the mountains I experience God's love in a special, personal way even as I struggle to find words to describe my awe and wonder. I give thanks today for people throughout the ages who have been willing to be overwhelmed by God's holiness, and have seen their sacred stories intertwined with the Creator's holy mountains. I recall with thankfulness Moses and Elijah, Peter and James and John and Jesus, and Muhammad, the Bodhisattva of Buddhism, and the spiritual ancestors of the Inca and Navajo and Siksika, and pilgrim guides of our own experience – people like the late Bob Smith, a walking encyclopedia of the flora and fauna of these mountains and valleys. I express my gratitude for all people of faith, who continue to cultivate the understanding that God is present in all of life, the joy and the pain, the immense and the tiny. I give thanks for the opportunity to live and work amidst these mountains. And in all of it, I am humbled by the overwhelming love of God in Christ, whose commitment to a better, more just world for all people, a world transformed, even transfigured, expresses the very glory of God. May this be so, Amen.

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