

**Sermon: February 11, 2024 (Transfiguration) – Mark 9: 2-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Banff AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

As many of you know, I grew up as a flatlander, in Regina SK. A flatlander, and a city-dweller, and my main relationship with the outdoors was with a group of buddies, with either a football or hockey sticks figuring prominently. And don't get me wrong, we spent a lot of time outdoors and we'd still be out there to about, say, plus 35 or minus 25, but things like hiking and skiing or anything you'd call "love of nature" were not on the agenda.

With that in mind, a bit over 3 years after arriving in Canmore I wrote an open letter to the Mountains on Transfiguration Sunday, 2016, and as I have found myself in recent days musing quite a bit on the ways that my twelve years at Ralph Connor have changed me, I'd like to ask your indulgence as I revisit that letter:

**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE MOUNTAINS**

It doesn't feel like I've known you very long, and even after a dozen years don't know you as well as I would like to, but I feel compelled to write you about everything you mean to me.

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

We next met when Shannon and I made the trek from Regina **to live among the mountains and waters and trees of Vancouver** for our seminary years. In my early 20s I was growing more conscious of where and how I felt the Holy Presence of God, and at that point that was mainly in the blowing grasses and grains of parkland and prairie...so it took a while for me to appreciate and befriend you. I met others who had grown up with you, in BC or Alberta, who articulated how they felt the imminence and excellence of creation in your presence, and their connection with you led me to see a non-flat landscape in a new way.

Then, after many years in Calgary warmed me up to you, I came to live in your safe shadow. And in every scene of my life since then, you mountains have been there, providing a picture-perfect view in every direction; yet you give me my space. You make the perfect backdrop for our lives and our Church homes without muscling in on us. I like having you there. And on that note, **I need to give a special note of appreciation to you mountains of the Bow Valley.**

**You invite the world.** Each year, more than 4 million visitors come to Banff, and at this moment, the best cross-country skiers in the world are competing in Canmore. Where we live, we bump into athletes and coaches and spectators, young workers who have come here from all around the world, and all manner of tourists; what a gift that is. You, Rocky Mountains, bring the world to us, and draw from us the gift of hospitality as our horizons are expanded by these guests from afar.

**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, villages and hamlets nestled in your midst, we find such deep commitment to the causes of the world: health and education in Africa and Latin America, environmental education and advocacy, literacy classes for newcomers from all over, willingness to help refugee families start a new life, and respectful steps toward truth and reconciliation. That touches us as we visit here, it shapes us as we live here, it guides us in our life as a Community of Faith.

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 you have introduced me to, you mountains 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 enormous & 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, 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 and support us are true gifts.

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.

Within our Judaeo-Christian faith family, today we revisit the account of the Transfiguration, and whether it took place on Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon, it was one of those "thin places" where there's no appreciable distance between the life we live, and the realm of holiness. Whether Tabor or Hermon, **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. 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.

And as we stand only a few days away from the journey of Lent, we cannot help but think of the Mount of Beatitudes, where Jesus spoke the sermon on the mount, Mount Zion, the home of the Temple where Jesus had such hard days, and Mount Calvary,

that 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 acknowledge the holiness of Mount Arafat, where Muhammad preached his final sermon; we think of Shinto pilgrims ascending Mount Fuji; we recall those whose life's goal has been to ascend Everest and K2, Kilimanjaro or the Matterhorn. And we open ourselves to the experiences of those who have been in this place for millennia, who regard Iyamnuthka as sacred space and not just a good hike, who bring us the stories of the Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain here in Banff, and the Last Stoney – known to Canmorites as Ha Ling Peak.

**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. You have dazzled us with the immensity and beauty that only our creator could even conceptualize. Your grandeur, O Mountains, shakes me up and makes me think of God's unrestrained glory. **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. You shelter and nurture plants and animals of all varieties. Your height and breadth and seeming aloofness is breathtaking and alluring, and has drawn our forebears in faith to experience time stand still on your slopes, Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah seemingly together as one. In all these things, O Mountains, you draw me to recognize and praise 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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