

Transfigured

What is it about mountains? Isn't there something about mountains that draws us to them? Maybe it's the cool, clean, pine-scented air. Or maybe it's the fresh perspective we get just by *being* in the mountains. I think John Denver must have felt that way. Remember John Denver? He liked to sing about mountains. One of his most popular songs begins with these words: *Almost heaven—West Virginia—Blue Ridge Mountains*. Almost heaven! A mountain is the closest we can get to heaven while our feet are still on earth.

In the biblical narrative, more than a few significant events take place on mountains. And in Matthew's Gospel, throughout the ministry of Jesus, we frequently find him on mountains. On a mountain, he preaches his best-known sermon. On a mountain, he feeds multitudes with five loaves and two fish. On a mountain, he has a long talk with his first disciples before he suffers. On a mountain, risen and living, he commissions them.

And on a mountain, we encounter Jesus in this account that the church reads on Transfiguration Sunday.

For you and me, mountaintop experiences stand out clearly in memory, etched in sharp relief. This could be because mountains form watersheds. Like the continental divide. On one side of the divide, water flows down the eastern slope; on the other side, down the western slope.

This mountain in Galilee represents a kind of divide, too. All that's come before is separated from all that will come after by this mountain of transfiguration—where we stand at a turning point in the Christian year.

All during this season after the Epiphany—beginning when the child Jesus was revealed to the Māgi—we've been working our way through the gospel readings, learning a little more from each one about who this Jesus actually is and about what he means in our lives. It's all been building toward what happens on this mountaintop.

In the Gospel, this is a defining moment. A pivotal moment. Just a few days before this mountaintop time, Jesus has told the twelve that he must go to Jerusalem. He's told them what awaits

him there. It won't be long till he'll be on his way. It won't be long till he'll leave Galilee and enter Judea.

But for now, Jesus has taken his three closest followers—his inner circle—and climbed a high mountain. Where he's revealed once again—not, this time, in the faint light of a star—but in other-worldly brilliance. Glowing. Radiant. Dazzling! With Israel's great lawgiver and Israel's most renowned prophet, whose presence with Jesus identifies him as the continuation and the fulfillment of God's loving purposes with God's people.

Even as Peter and James and John struggle with trying to process and find meaning in all that is before their eyes, a cloud covers the mountain. A cloud not unlike those from which the Holy One has spoken, according to their Scriptures. And from deep within this cloud, a voice: *This is my Son, marked by my love. My heart's delight. Listen to him.*

Listen to him, first-century disciples! Listen to him, twenty-first century disciples!

Listen to him who blesses those who walk in the ways of God's kingdom and not in the ways of the world.

Listen to him who urges you to refrain from speaking words that hurt. To let your words be kind.

Listen to him who counsels you to forget old grudges and to mend broken relationships.

Listen to him who instructs you to keep your heart pure and to be faithful in keeping your promises.

Listen to him who teaches you to give generously. To pray earnestly. To love deeply. To love the neighbor as yourself. To love even the enemy who is your neighbor, nearby or far away.

Listen to him who asks you to do to others as you would have them do to you.

Listen to him who has told you that in Jerusalem he will *submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive.*

Listen to him! Three disciples hear the heavenly voice. Three disciples fall to the ground. Terrified! Would you and I have reacted any differently? Would our faces have been down in the dirt like the faces of Peter and James and John? If you have ever heard God speaking directly to you, did it scare you out of your wits?

I think that fearfulness is a part of our human condition. And when fear has you in its grip—not *if* but *when*—when your fear is greatest, when you're trembling and shuddering and

crying out, it's then that Jesus comes to you. It's then that he says: *Don't be afraid. It's all right.* It's then that Jesus reaches out to you. Raises you up. Encourages you to take heart.

And with the eyes of faith, you see Jesus. Alone. Just like those long-ago disciples did. Moses and Elijah have vanished as suddenly as they appeared. When everyone else has gone, Jesus is with them still. When everyone else has gone, Jesus is with *you* still.

Even if you don't recognize him. Even if he is radically altered in appearance. On the mountain, light fills him. On the mountain, he is revealed as the One he has always been, is now, and always will be.

High atop this mountain with him, we're in what's been called a "thin place." A place where the veil between divinity and humanity narrows and is pulled away. A place where, in awe and wonder, we become aware that we stand on holy ground, aware of majesty and mystery. Three eyewitnesses don't really "get" what happens in the presence of the transfigured One.

Neither do you and I fully comprehend.

Yet in some indiscernible way, the transfiguration of Jesus has power to transfigure you, his present-day disciples. Because

Jesus touches you. He touches your innermost places. The grace of his touch makes all the difference in your life. The grace of his touch makes possible an intimate communion that bestows the courage and the strength to face whatever lies ahead. The grace of the touch of Jesus Christ works within and begins transfiguring you and me—frightened and flawed and fragile though we are. Transfiguring us into exactly who we were created to be.

Enabling and empowering us to join with him in transforming a world that—just like you and me—is a work in progress. A world in desperate need of transformation. The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

My brothers and sisters, this world stands in need. And this world's need is the mission of us who bear the name of Christ. When we walk out these doors today, we enter a mission field. Jesus leads us down from the mountain! For there's work to be done. The work Christ has started. The work he charges you and me with carrying on. Helping rid people of their demons. Healing. Teaching. Comforting. Forgiving. Proclaiming the coming reign of this One who goes before us.

The One we've seen today in this Gospel vision. Is it any more than a short-lived mountaintop encounter? Temporary? Transitory? An ephemeral, fleeting fantasy? A fable that, once a year, we come to church and hear before returning to our real, permanent, everyday lives?

Beloved, if that's our take on this revelation from Matthew, we might have it backward. For in this world, you and I are the ones just passing through. We're transients. We are frail, finite creatures.

But nothing is more lasting, more enduring, and more unchanging than the reality we're given a glimpse of today: Christ Jesus, God's own Son, and his glory that is from everlasting to everlasting.

You have beheld the glory of this One who has put on flesh. This One who has become fully human. This One who has lived among us. This One who, today, invites you to keep on following him through these next forty days of your journey. This One who, today, calls you to walk behind him on the way of the cross. It is a hard path. It is a narrow path. But it is the path that leads to life with the One in whose eternal glory you—transfigured!—may have a share.

Will you go with him?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.