

We Have Mountains to Climb

A Sermon
by Shelly Davis

Scripture Texts:
Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-36

Unbelievably bright light,
glow-in-the-dark clothing,
shining faces,
formidable clouds that hover, challenge, and
embolden,
sudden appearances of great leaders from
the past,
a piercing, unequivocal revelation
of who is really chosen by God.

- Special effects fitting for any
 - Marvel superhero film,
 - Steven Spielberg classic,
 - Chronicles of Narnia, or
 - Harry Potter movie.
- Special effects that many of us may even long for as we drink from the firehose of the horrifying events and news of these days.
- Special effects that characterize our two scripture passages for this Transfiguration Sunday.

In the book of Exodus and in the synoptic gospels, including Luke, we find these vibrantly cinematic stories replete with special effects of transfiguration or metamorphosis—

visible changes in physical appearance—that help God’s people understand and “see” and “hear” God’s revelatory messengers sent to deliver—to *embody*—God’s revelatory message of liberation, formation, and consecration.

Mountains—physically and metaphorically—are enduring places of encounter and epiphany and revelation.

- If you’ve ever had the chance to scale an actual mountain—or even a particularly high hill—either on foot or in a car—you know how different everything looks and feels from that peak.
- We instinctively pause, take deeper breaths, survey all that we can see, and begin to receive in our mind, body, and spirit a new, larger, more expansive perspective on the world before us and within us.

And, it is certainly worth noting that, “in the ancient Near East—during the time of Moses and later Jesus—mountains were considered pillars of the earth, holding the sky in place.

- Such a place—with its head reaching toward the heavens—was the bridge between earth—the realm of humans—and the heavens, the realm of the gods.” (Judy Fentress-Williams, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume I)
- Of course this is the place for divine encounters! Moses and Jesus and their followers knew that from the moment they

- saw a mountain looming on the horizon or
- heard mention of a mountain in their stories of faith.

God *called* Moses up the mountain and Jesus *called* Peter, James, and John up the mountain.

- We don't always get to choose the mountains we must climb, do we?
- Sometimes the mountains are chosen for us:
 - mountains of ill health or physical pain,
 - mountains of unemployment,
 - mountains of illegal and legal guns and weapons of mass destruction,
 - mountains of dysfunctional family relationships,
 - mountains of rancorous politicians and legislative and judicial incivility and doublespeak,
 - mountains of inherited privilege *OR* discrimination and marginalization connected to our:
 - race,
 - ethnicity,
 - gender,
 - sexual orientation,
 - age, or
 - physical or mental abilities . . .

Do the climbing of these mountains offer any possibility of divine encounter for us?

- *Possibility and potential* for divine encounter, *yes*.
- *Necessity and guarantee* for divine encounter, *no*.

We can claw and scramble and charge our way up any number of mountains in our lives and never encounter anything remotely divine or God-like. Yet I am pretty sure our intentions for climbing and our climbing companions can make all the difference.

When God first calls Moses up to the mountain, God's call is to "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance." (Exodus 24:1)

Jesus called Peter, James and his brother John to make this particular climb with him.

Neither of these were solo climbs.

Any basic or beginners' mountain climbing guide will tell you no mountain climb should ever be attempted alone; at the very least, one is to climb with friends who have already climbed mountains.

The promise and power of twelve-step recovery programs is shared and underscored through the practice of each individual person learning and working the steps with a more seasoned sponsor and then becoming a sponsor for others when the mountain of recovery may not be quite as daunting as it was in the beginning.

What a striking vision of church—

- *any* church—
- *this* church—and
- our shared community and mission!
- A community of climbers—
 - some more experienced than others,
 - together seeking to climb the many mountains in our lives *that hold the possibility and potential for divine encounter and transfiguration.*

We must choose and embrace, call and encourage, our climbing companions wisely for the ones with whom we climb are an integral part of our *own* climb:

- guiding and supporting and coming alongside us,
- setting their own, and receiving our, example,
- as sources of inspiration and consolation,
- and witnesses to our own learning, growth, and transformation

It seems to me that our most significant learning, growth, and transformation as individual human beings is not even possible outside such companionship, such community.

Buddhist monk, teacher, poet, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh once said, “We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.”

Did you ever wonder if Moses and Jesus may not have even been able to *receive* their distinct revelations or experience their respective transfigurations had they journeyed up each of those mountains alone?

Yet regardless of whether they *had* to have others along, their climbing companions were not simply along for the ride or moral support.

- No, Moses' and Jesus' climbing companions were clearly, also, and perhaps, *primarily, the ones who were most radically changed* by their leaders' transfigurations.

Jesus' companions—

- after they awakened from their notable state of sleepiness,
- began to see their teacher's face glow and his clothes become bright as a flash of lightning,
- Suddenly seeing Moses and Elijah—or apparitions of them talking with Jesus—
- Peter makes a valiant effort to become fully present to the moment by offering to create shelters for each these three great prophets before them
- Only to be overshadowed by a descending cloud that terrified them all.

Then a voice from that cloud said—

- just as a voice had proclaimed when Jesus was baptized—

- “*This is my Own, my Chosen; Listen to this one!*”
- Following that proclamation, Luke tells us,
 - only Jesus remained.
 - Jesus is the Chosen One.
 - Jesus is the one to whom we are called to *LISTEN*.

Is it any wonder Luke wraps the story here noting they were stunned into silence and told no one any of the things they had seen?

How many of our mountain climbing experiences:

- overwhelm us,
- jolt us out of our slumber,
- inject a certain amount of terror in us,
- and render us speechless?

These are the moments—and the mountains:

- mountains of ill health or physical pain,
- mountains of unemployment,
- mountains of illegal and legal guns and weapons of mass destruction,
- mountains of dysfunctional family relationships,
- mountains of rancorous politicians and legislative and judicial incivility and doublespeak,
- mountains of inherited privilege *OR* discrimination and marginalization
- these are the moments—precisely the moments—
- when all the special effects—

- all the unbelievably bright light, glow-in-the-dark clothing,
- shining faces,
- formidable clouds that hover, challenge, and embolden,
- sudden appearances of great leaders from the past,
- a piercing, unequivocal revelation of who is *really* chosen by God,
- prepare us, *please God, may these moments and these mountains prepare us* for all that lies ahead.

There is a very good reason why Luke places this story of Jesus' transfiguration—

- this revelation of God's glory in Jesus
- this revelation of God's extraordinary light in Jesus
- this piercing, unequivocal revelation of who is *really* chosen by God

just after Jesus foretold his suffering, death and resurrection, essentially offering a glimpse of the coming attractions that awaited them all.

- Those coming attractions of
 - healings, yes,
 - teaching, yes, including:
 - parables about surprising neighbors and sibling rivalry,

- and the gift of a particular prayer that still lives in the center of each of our worship services and each of our hearts.
- Those coming attractions, including:
 - political leaders and religious leaders
 - whose decisions and actions destroyed lives—bodies and spirits—
 - through greed and state-sponsored violence
 - seeing themselves as “CHOSEN” above any and all others.
- Those coming attractions, including:
 - rejection, yes, and
 - setting their faces and bodies and purpose toward Jerusalem, yes, and
 - suffering, yes, and
 - ultimately—*thank God—ultimately* the coming attractions of:
 - NEW LIFE and HOPE,
 - that THEN and NOW,
 - have the power to:
 - *still* SHINE LIGHT on Jesus’ face,
 - *still* SHINE LIGHT and illumine the way for any mountain we must climb,
 - *still* WAKE US UP and GIVE US THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE to face all that we must face—TOGETHER.

Dearly beloved mountain-climbing companions,
Dear *CHURCH*:

- as we prepare to turn our hearts once again toward the journey of self-reflection that is the liturgical or church's season of Lent,
- I urge us:
 - to remember,
 who is clearly God's Chosen One,
 - to remember,
 that we are not called to climb any of these mountains alone,
 - to remember,
 that it is definitely time to WAKE UP and recognize that we too are
 - called and
 - equipped and
 - encouragedto follow in the way of a "suffering servant" teacher, healer, fully embodied, and ultimately transforming God

We too—

- like Peter, James, and John—
- like so very many mountain climbers who have gone before us—
- face the challenge of ascending and descending the mountains of our lives with mere glimpses
 - as powerful as those glimpses might be
 - *mere glimpses*—
 - brief shining moments—

- of the glory of God and
- the hope of liberation and redemption and holy love that uphold us and never leave us in the tough, tough climbs of our lives.

Our faith in

- this God we gather to worship,
- this God incarnate—in the flesh—and in *our* flesh—
- this God Emmanuel—God *with us*—

Our faith and participation in

- a community of faith where we share the climbing with companions who also seek and trust and yearn and falter and try again to follow in the way of Jesus—

Our faith, and our God,

- lead us and
- guide us and
- call us up and down these mountains again today.

C. S. Lewis writes this final word from Aslan, the “Great Lion,” in the fourth book of his Chronicles of Narnia series, *The Silver Chair*,

“Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken.

Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is *so important to know them by heart* and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.”

(Quoted by Maryetta Madeleine Anshutz in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume I)

Yes, we have mountains, many mountains, before us to climb, my dear friends in Christ. Indeed, it is Christ who calls us—*together*—to climb these mountains so that we *all* might be changed.

And as we sang together in our opening hymn of hope this morning:

We have come at Christ’s own bidding
to this high and holy place,
Where we wait with hope and longing
for some token of God’s grace.

Strengthened by this glimpse of glory . . .
may our worship give us courage
to proclaim what we profess,
daily lives that prove us people
of the [loving] God we bless.

—*We Have Come at Christ’s Own Bidding*,
Carl P. Daw, Jr., 1988,
The New Century Hymnal, No. 182

Please God, I pray, we may make it so. Amen.

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