

Sermon – Buena Vista  
Scripture– Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9  
Transfiguration Sunday, February 23, 2020  
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On this Transfiguration Sunday, our first scripture reading found in Exodus 24:12-18, recalls Moses coming into God's presence on the top of Mount Sinai before leading the Hebrews on a 40- year sojourn through the wilderness to the Promised Land. As the church moves into Lent, the 40 days commemorating the number of years the Israelites journeyed and the number of days Christ spent in the wilderness, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God. Hear now God's Holy word.

*12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 17:1-9. On this last Sunday before Lent when the church begins the journey toward the cross and remembers Jesus' suffering and death, the story of the transfiguration is a pledge of God's commitment to resurrection. The presence of Moses and Elijah on this mountain connects Jesus with a long history –the rich legacy of God's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, and of God's sending prophets to call people to grace. Hear now God's Holy word.

*1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: *Buena Vista*

*The text: Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain... Matthew 17:1*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for those moments when we are able to rise above the ordinary and catch a view that changes our perspective and our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Buena Vista means “beautiful view” in Spanish and is the name of a town nestled in the mountains of Colorado surrounded by beautiful views. The first time I saw a mountain was in Buena Vista, Colorado where I spent a week at Silver Cliff Ranch, a Young Life camp. At the age of 14, I was astounded by the beauty before me on this high mountain. Besides seeing the majesty of God’s creation that week, I also encountered Christ in the powerful message, the delightful fun, and the love I received from the community which surrounded me.

Over the years, from time to time, I have been led up a high mountain, both figuratively and literally. These “buena vistas,” these “beautiful views” have fortified and deepened my faith. The memory of these experiences are etched into my heart and have been a source of strength during both ordinary days and difficult times when my journey has taken me into valleys that are dark and without a view.

As Todd Knox suggested in his message about our Kenya mission, both in the beautiful views they witnessed in this mountainous terrain and in the life changing relationships they encountered with the Kenyan people, there are certain things one has to see for oneself, up close and personal, to comprehend fully ...sort of like the Grand Canyon!

Certainly this was the experience for Peter, James and John when Jesus took them up a high mountain and they witnessed the transfiguration of Christ.

As Matthew highlights in his gospel, the story of Jesus’ transfiguration on a high mountain has many parallels with the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. Both are encounters with God on a cloud-covered mountaintop. In both, God’s voice is heard from within the covering cloud. Jesus’ face shines like the sun as Moses’ did on his descent. Perhaps most poignantly; in both, being in the presence of God is not a casual, but an awesome and unsettling experience. Being in the presence of the omnipotent is a powerful reminder of our finiteness. Being in the presence of the benevolent Creator is a compelling reminder of our humanity.

Transfiguration Sunday signals that the Season of Epiphany now comes to an end. The church has had a long look at the majesty and glory of God. On this last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, when the church prepares for the recollection of Jesus’ suffering and death, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God as Christ’s face shines like the sun. The transfigured Jesus who is stunning in majesty is the same Jesus who walks down that mountain through the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrow. There lies the beautiful, paradoxical view of the One in whom suffering and glory, darkness and light, death and life belong together.

To be sure, this paradox does not suggest that we are always able to glimpse the wonder of divine presence when in the midst of darkness and death. Suffering is not to be romanticized.

Instead, let us understand the beautiful view of the transfiguration as a foreshadowing, a vivid, up close and personal, confirmation of God's commitment to bring life out of death, of God's commitment to resurrection at the end of each of our journeys.

The Rev. Doug Dezotell, UMC pastor and journalist, reflects on this paradox in an article entitled, "Silent, Yet Still There."

Years ago, following World War II, a short poem was found carved on a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany. The cellar was a place where many Jews hid during the holocaust.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.  
I believe in love even when I cannot feel it.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.

One cannot even begin to imagine the horrors that the many Jewish men, women and children experienced during those years. Whole communities were wiped out; families were torn about; and lives were destroyed. Yet in the midst of this dark and desolate valley someone had the faith and the courage to carve those simple words into the wall of the place where they were hiding.

These simple, yet profound words have illuminated a beautiful view for people of all faiths. Mark Miller, a musician and lecturer at Yale's Institute of Sacred Music (where Dale Rogers received his degree) composed an anthem to these words which our choir has presented.

Elie Wiesel, the well-known Romanian-born Jewish-American author and playwright, is also a Holocaust survivor. Throughout much of his life, Wiesel struggled with his beliefs, and is considered a man of great intellect and insight. Yet, he always held on to a faith in God.

After hearing Wiesel speak during one of his lectures, a person approached him and asked, "How can you believe in God after all that has happened to you?" He replied, "After all that has happened to me, how can I not believe in God."

Life is filled with difficulties for all of us. For men and women of faith, we can have confidence that we do not walk through the dark and silent valleys alone. The paradox of Christ affirms that God walks with us.

When darkness surrounds us, when love evades us, and when God is silent, may those mountaintop Buena Vistas etched in our memories sustain us and inspire us to believe in our shining Creator, transfigured Redeemer, and steadfast Sustainer.

So be it. Amen.