

Sermon – The Hills We Climb
Transfiguration Sunday, February 27, 2022
Scripture – Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36
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On this Transfiguration Sunday, our first scripture reading is Exodus 34:29-35. Five times Moses ascends and descends the mountain in the Exodus story and today's reading is his final journey. The Ten Commandments have been given by God, broken by the people, and given again. The hill Moses climbs brings a glow to his face. Following his descend he leads 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 in the face of Moses. Hear now God's word to us.

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with God, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with God. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 9:28-36. On this last Sunday before the season of Lent when the church remembers Jesus' suffering and death, the story of the transfiguration is a pledge to God's commitment to resurrection, to the promise that the various roads to Jerusalem that faithful disciples take will lead to life. The presence of Moses and Elijah on this mountain connects Jesus with a long history—a history of God's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, and of God's sending prophets to call people to grace. And so, transfiguration is also a fulfillment of an ancient heritage. Once again, the disciples remind us that being in the presence of God is not casual, but an awesome and terrifying experience. Hear now God's Holy word.

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses, and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen. Amen.

The title of the sermon: The Hills We Climb

The Text: ... Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. Luke 9:28

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the hills we each climb and for those moments we catch life-changing views of who you are and get who you call us to be. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

"The Hill We Climb" is the title of the poem 22-year-old American poet Amanda Gorman wrote and recited at President Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021. Listen to a few lines in her powerful call for unity and justice, through both reckoning with the nation's past and looking toward its future.

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?...

*If we're to live up to our own time,
then victory won't lie in the blade,
but in all the bridges we've made.
That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb,
if only we dare...*

So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left...

*And every known nook of our nation
and every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful,
will emerge battered and beautiful.
When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame and unafraid.
The new dawn balloons as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

The word images Miss Gorman chose "brave enough to be the light" and "the hill we dare to climb" as she challenges the American people to take the high road resonate with our faith experience each Transfiguration Sunday as we hike up the mountain with Peter, James, and John to witness the dazzling white appearance of Christ in the meeting of Moses and Elijah. In this holy encounter is both a reckoning with our past and a looking toward our future. Just as the Israelites were challenged to reflect Yahweh's holiness by creating a community where human life is lived justly and compassionately, each one of us is invited, upon our return down the mountain, to be transfigured, to be brave enough to be the light, illuminating justice and compassion in our relationships with one another and with creation.

Dr. Paul Farmer, who died unexpectedly in his sleep at the age of 62 this past Monday on the grounds of a hospital and university he had helped establish in Rwanda was someone who illuminated justice and compassion in his faithful and resilient life. Dr. Farmer was a physician, public health official, humanitarian, and man of faith who gained global acclaim for his work delivering high-quality health care to some of the world's poorest people.

Mountains Beyond Mountains, a short book written by journalist Tracy Kidder in 2003 and a gift to my husband Peter from his sister Sarah, is a biography of Dr. Farmer, a physician who rose from humble beginnings during which his brilliant, creative, and loving parents led their large, poor family through years living on a school bus and houseboat. After winning scholarships to Duke then Harvard Medical School and in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, he studied public health and set out to meet the challenge of treating the underserved and underprivileged in Haiti. Kidder described Farmer's extraordinary efforts to care for his patients, sometimes climbing mountains beyond mountains, and, in so doing, exemplifying the Haitian proverb which beckons us to surmount each greater challenge that lies just beyond the one before us.

After climbing the mountain with Jesus and witnessing the Transfiguration, certainly Peter, James, and John faced yet another mountain that would challenge their faith and call as apostles to share the Good News of Christ. They were brave enough to see the light on the mountain and proved later brave enough to be the light.

Transfiguration Sunday illuminates the transition from Epiphany to Lent. The church has had a long look at the majesty and glory of God during the Season of Light. 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 along 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 amid darkness and death. Suffering is not to be romanticized. Instead, let us understand 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.

Our Holy and loving God presents us with mountains beyond mountains in the call to live just and compassionate lives. For men and women of faith, we can have confidence that we do not climb these mountains alone.

When we find ourselves in that never-ending shade, may we dare to climb the hill before us, may we see the light and have the courage to be the light, and may we draw energy and love from our shining Creator, transfigured Redeemer, and steadfast Sustainer.

So be it. Amen.

