

Sermon: On the Mountaintops**Scripture: Luke 9:28-36****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 27, 2022**

Let me give you a hint about the Bible. When you are reading or listening to a reading and you hear the phrase “and they went up onto the mountain” you should sit up and take special notice cause there isn’t any and I mean any “going up on the mountain” in the Bible that’s not very important, if not THE pivotal moment in the story being told. And here in Luke chapter 9, it’s no different.

“Jesus took Peter, John, and James with him and went up onto the mountain to pray.” And you are like “wait, what?” Yes, that’s right he went up to the mountain... and you scoot to the edge of your seat to hear what happens next cause you know it’s gonna be big, this isn’t just a hike for a nice view even though Peter, James and John might think so... we all now know better. Because in the overarching story of the Bible almost all the pivotal moments, from the beginning through the middle to the end take place on mountaintops, for it is there where heaven and earth, human and divine, this world and the other, meet.

So let’s begin at the beginning and climb our way to where we are today. In the beginning, the Garden of Eden was a high mountain garden where the rivers all flowed out from that fountainhead to water the world. In Jewish cosmology it was humanity’s original home a place of peace and plenty marked by humans living naked in harmony with one another and in full relationship with God, free among the animals and the fruit trees, no shame, no violence, no need or desire to displace the other... the way we all dream it would be.

But as the story goes, the human fell off that mountain in the way the human always falls – they reached out to take what is not theirs to take; it's told in Genesis as the very first instance of human disobedience and is being witnessed in bold relief right now as Russia tries to take Ukraine by force. Humanity's original sin of greed and pride and gluttony and lust all wrapped up in one ugly motion as Adam and Eve and Putin and all of us on one level or another reach for the apple that is not ours to take and violence ensues as we fall from grace.

According to the Bible the human journey, then, is one long effort to return to the mountain garden. In Persia the word for garden is "pardes" which is where we get the word "paradise". From Eden to the fall to Paradise. It's the fundamental patterning of reality as Fr. Richard Rohr suggests, call it what you will - from order to disorder to reordered, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, from affirming to denying to reconciling, from solution to dissolution to resolution, the fundamental patterning of reality... articulated in story form by the Bible. So the pattern goes Garden-Fall-Paradise from beginning through the middle to the end of the entire biblical account, and within that arc there are many micro-patterns of the same thing going, *the mountaintop* always representing that original unity with God or a return to God or God's presence offered to humanity, the coming together of heaven and earth.

So you have the garden of the cosmic mountain of Eden where God gives the first commands to the human to tend the garden, eat and enjoy and be nourished by the food of any tree... except don't eat from *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* and they take it anyway and are exiled from the garden and God as a result. The Hebrews in the wilderness in their effort to return

to God come upon Mount of Sinai where Moses receives commands from God about how the Hebrew people are to live to remain in covenant with God, which is about how they are to be good and just, living under the Kingship and expectations of a just and loving God, not grabbing for what is not theirs at the expense of others but instead being just and kind, humble and righteous.

Eventually after 40 years in the wilderness they come into the Promised Land itself as they continue to grapple with how to live faithfully to God in the midst of foreign influences and they work at fulfilling the law but they continually fail and the prophets arise in their midst to call them toward more just living, pointing out that they are oppressing others and being unjust which skews their relationship with God and one of the greatest and most admired of the prophets was Elijah who also goes up to the mountain himself and has an experience of God, remember in the silence, he hears the still small voice.

Later in their history the Hebrew people scale another mountain this time Mount Zion where they build the temple which holds God's presence in a particular way, this pin point place of heaven and earth coming together, a replica actually of the Garden of Eden itself around which grows up the holy city on that mountain which is Jerusalem which at the very end of time will come as a bride on her wedding day the holy city of Jerusalem, the new heaven and new earth of paradise and all will be made new and well and from that city will flow the river of life down and out to all the world.

But between the building of the earthly city of Jerusalem in the ancient days and the final culmination in Zion in the days to come, in the Biblical story enters the figure of Jesus. And the Gospel writers lose little time in associating Jesus with mountaintops. As soon as he is baptized, you have the devil taking

Jesus to the mountaintop to offer him the world – you know, how the devil is working in Vladimir Putin right now - and we also read of Jesus' most famous sermon of all time which was given where... on a mountain – the Sermon on the Mount - again the commands of God issuing from the mountaintop talking about what it means to live faithfully, to forgive your enemy, to not judge others, to give to those in need and that the blessed are those poor and the meek and the merciful and so on and so forth.

And that brings us to the mountaintop of today's Gospel reading, where the transfiguration of Jesus occurs. And now that we know what happens on mountaintops and what has happened in Jewish history on mountaintops, we see that it makes sense that Jesus is accompanied by Moses who received the law from God on one side and Elijah the prophets who received the voice and spirit of God on the other – all the law and the prophets - which suggests the whole and nothing less than the whole of the tradition of the Hebrew people converging upon Jesus.

Peter experiences this moment of profound culmination of all the Jews have ever lived and hoped for and he wants to build a tabernacle for God's presence right there, just like the temple in Jerusalem built on Mount Zion until the command comes from God in no uncertain terms like it came to Adam and Eve and Moses and Elijah and to David and Solomon, but the command on this mountaintop that comes from God goes like this – “this is my beloved, listen to him.” This is my presence now, it goes with him, listen to what he says and my divine presence will follow.

So there they are on top of the mountain. The place of God and Jesus the Lord is there just as the devil had originally offered him to be and he's been

designated as favored and endorsed by 2 of the other most powerful and holy men of the whole Jewish tradition... I mean this is all power and glory and honor, I mean it doesn't get any bigger and better than this! He is the Lord over all things. And understandably Peter wants to build some kind of massive edifice to mark this moment, to establish his glory for all people to see there on the mountaintop, people can come and behold him. BUT you know what Jesus does? He walks down the mountain, down into a crowd where you can barely tell where he is and he goes up to an unclean, sick little boy, he heals him and walks him back to his father.

And that we say, the Bible says, is the nature of God's kingdom and glory on earth. We don't believe it or can't grasp it or don't want to accept it somehow but it's right there in bold relief. The whole massive load of divine glory that could take this world and do whatever it pleases with it, steps down from the mountain, down into the crowd, down onto his knees to face a grubby little sick boy and heals him.

What is this? It's the glory of God noticing a little one and uttering a word of healing and offering a touch of grace and putting to shame what this world thinks of as GLORY - the mightiest of military commanders, the richest of CEO's, the most famous of superstars, the most admired intellectuals, all that human glory "is but a breath," the Psalmist says, "all, bustling in vain, heaping up riches" that will fade away like the grass....while God, Jesus, reaches out to heal a child. Somehow that's where it's at, that's what it's about. All the mountain top glory funneled down to a single solitary point of love.

And somehow - we should sit up and take notice, here - cause somehow, the keepers of the status quo, the people who run the world, the people at the

top of society who benefit from the way it's organized, those people, aren't having it. They feel threatened by great power expressed in the humble form of a healer. All glory and honor should be theirs not some unclean marginal nothing of a little boy. That's where God Almighty's eye of grace turns? While God's eye of judgment turns to me and to us for ignoring the small things, the diseased, oppressed, hungry, lonely ones?

And so the keepers of status quo, the power-holders, guess what they do? They go climb a mountain and defiantly on that mountaintop they fashion a cross and they take that man with all the glory of God who healed the little boy and the bleeding woman and the sick girl and ate with sex workers and tax collectors and laughed with fishermen and shepherds and they nailed him to that cross tree for all to see because they were not about to accept such a challenge to their power.

And on that mountaintop in a way that no human could have ever predicted or imagined, heaven and earth, human and divine, this world and the other world met in the dying figure of Jesus on the cross... all the while the authorities, the keepers of the status quo, believing that they were doing what was right, believing... and get this link back to the beginning of the whole story, they believed that they had the knowledge of good and evil and were doing what was good and forever more in bold relief that cross and that execution of the God of love indicts us and requires us to no longer claim our own goodness and righteousness over and against others.

It doesn't mean we don't have the power and the capacity to discern what is right and wrong and we must at times be free to say that something like what Putin is doing to Ukraine right now is simply and purely wrong and evil? But even then Putin is not the only man in power who is reaching out and taking what is

not his to take. How much do we as Americans benefit from corporations that do the same thing, reach out and take what is not their to take? How much do we benefit from this land taken in the same way? It's not to give Putin a buy for what he's doing but it's to understand that what is wrong in this world, that Putin represents in macro is also the same reality that rears its ugly head in our own hearts and in our own lives. The execution of Jesus and the devastation of Ukraine and the victims of our own privilege is all a part of the same patterning in this world – the spilling of blood and creating of victims to get ourselves to the mountaintop and devour the fruit of glory and power and immortality that is not ours to take instead of receiving humbly and vulnerably the mountaintop commands of God which is always about relinquishing such projects of self-grandeur and coming down and stepping down and kneeling down to make of our lives a solitary point of love.

May our Lenten journey give us some new insight, awareness, wisdom for recognizing our own mountaintop projects of grandeur and give us the strength and capacity to transform them into projects that glorify God and are apart of healing our hurting world in Jesus' blessed name, amen.