

*This sermon was offered by Creation Care Alliance of WNC Director, Sarah Ogletree, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, on February 27th, 2022. The scripture was Luke 9: 28-36.*

In today's passage, Jesus withdraws to the mountain to pray with three of his disciples: Peter, James, and John. And while he is praying, miracles happen. Jesus' face changes, and his clothes become a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear and speak to Jesus of his coming death. The disciples, filled with amazement, ask if they should build booths for Jesus and the prophets so they can stay on the mountain. But then, a great cloud descends on them. A voice declares from the vapor that Jesus is the Son of God, and when the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus is alone, and the disciples are filled with a sublime sense of wonder.

Miracles on mountaintops. Sublimity. Wonder inspired. If you are like me, the story of Jesus' Transfiguration is more familiar than you may have anticipated—and for more reasons than one. Though perhaps not so drastically, I have often felt changed when trekking up a ridgeline. I've felt the presence of God in those thin places above the valleys that host my day-to-day life. I've felt my face shine with a peace I didn't know previously. In those high-up places, I've been filled and captured by the beauty of creation. And like the disciples, I have wanted to stay in that sacred and timeless space. But I can't. *We can't.*

This reality is essential to the work of creation care.

Caring for the fullness of creation, our human and non-human neighbors, demands that we care for ourselves. We must take time to listen to the still small voice of God—to feel the presence of the Holy surrounding us, changing us, and giving us courage. Particularly in times of crisis and violence like those we've seen this week. We need the journey of the mountaintop and these mountaintop moments because, without them, it is difficult to be the vehicles of peace, hope, love, and faith we are called to be for others, ourselves, and all of this world that God loves and calls good. So yes, we must go up. But we must also come down.

We must come back into our lives, back into our mess, back into systems that value profit before people and places—where water burns from fracking and forests burn from climate crisis. We must bring the gifts of our time with God on the mountaintop, our shining faces and spirits, back into *this world*. This world in such desperate need of hope, imagination, and change. With the gifts of the mountain, the gifts of God, we can begin to create the change we need. Because though sown in peace, the gifts of the mountain are harvested in chaos.

We need stillness most when we cannot find it.

Time and time again, Jesus retreated to the wilderness and returned to his community with greater clarity, purpose, and love. This is the power of the mountain. Through mountaintop moments, we are granted the strength we need to reenter the valleys in and around us—to offer stillness and clarity to a world in which chaos and confusion so often reign. *Up and down. Giving and receiving. Loving and being loved.* This is the life we are called to. But what does it mean to live like this? What does it look like to go to the mountain and come back? How can we ensure that we are both filling our cups and pouring out our love for each other and all life? How do we use the gifts of the mountain to create beloved community and bring the kin-dom of God? Well, bear with me for a moment.

Let's go back to the text.

Jesus' journey to the mountaintop was trodden by many feet before him, including those of Moses and Elijah—the very prophets who joined him on the summit in today's scripture passage. Moses, who changed the course of history by liberating the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt, went to Mount Sinai to be with God and receive the ten commandments. When he journeyed back down the mountain, his face shone with the light of having been in God's presence. To Moses, the mountaintop served as both a meeting place and a conduit to receive God's teachings for God's people. A similar reality was true for Elijah. Though driven to the mountains by fear for his life and a sense of hopelessness, Elijah found atop Mount Sinai the voice of God and *a plan that would save his life.*

Through the commandments, Moses was given direction. Through God's still small voice, Elijah found a way forward when it had seemed that there was no way. Moses and Elijah, great changemakers that they were, found their path atop the mountain with God. Like Jesus, they found counsel in high places, and that counsel carried them through their lives. From the stories of the prophets and of Jesus, we learn that mountains must be sought when we feel lost—in times of confusion and need and lack and hardship. We also learn that prayer atop mountains is life-changing for both the sojourner and the community they come home to.

When I consider the mountains in my own life, I can think of many gifts they have offered me. First, there is Waterrock Knob. As the tallest mountain in the Plott Balsams located a mere 15 minutes from where I grew up in Sylva, North Carolina, Waterrock Knob holds a special place in my heart. My family and I often journeyed to its craggy peak when I was a child, and when I think about where I first felt God in a big way, Waterrock Knob comes to mind. In that parking lot, with 360-degree views of the Blue Ridge, I felt simultaneously large and small. On that summit, hidden by rock and rhododendron, I felt a sense of calm, joy, and hope.

I have often said that growing up in the mountains of western North Carolina is what seeded in me a desire to care for God's creation because the beauty of this place makes God and God's love

abundantly clear. But if I'm being specific, Waterrock Knob did that for me. Waterrock Knob is the genesis in my calling to ecological ministry. Because of this place and the ways that God showed God's self to me there, I am who I am today. Each and every time I journey back up that mountain, I am reminded of who I am—as a child of God, as a leader, as one who is deeply loved. And I carry that sense of self and purpose back home with me.

Another sacred place in my life is Roan Mountain. Roan is located on the North Carolina/Tennessee border about twenty minutes from where I now live with my husband, William, in his hometown of Bakersville. On this peak, you are above the clouds. And no matter what you carry with you up that mountain, by the time you reach the bald, the expanse of high altitude grasses and shrubbery, all you can feel is a sense of the Holy. *The ground practically vibrates with God.* And each step up that mountain acts as an unburdening. William and I often go to Roan not as our best selves. We're tired, burned out, over it, grumpy. But without fail, that view and the crispness of the air reminds us of what matters. On Roan, we are gifted with the beauty of life, and when we go back to our house, the ordinary feels a little bit extraordinary. The hard things feel less hard, and we have the energy to tackle them. William has told me that when he was struggling in college, he would imagine Roan and be gifted with a sense of courage even through that imagining.

But I don't share this to make it sound like you need a thrilling vista to be with God. The hill behind our house offers its own sense of power and belonging. It's not a destination. I don't think it has a name, and it isn't very tall. But in those woods, where I can begin to see the outline of the cove where we live, I am offered stillness. So often in my life, I deprive myself of stillness. I act as though my to-do list is too important to pause, breathe, and find respite. But breathing, pausing, and respite are essential to being human, and stillness is available to me in every breath. I don't travel to Waterrock Knob or Roan very often, but I have made a commitment to myself this year to walk up that hill more frequently. My to-do list fades as my legs burn, and when I sit by the spring toward the top of our ridge, I am not alone. God is with me. And I am reminded that God is with me there and here and everywhere.

We all need the mountain. We need it to remember who we are and what we're called to. And we need it to remember what is possible. Because friends, *so much is possible.* Before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King Junior gave a speech at the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee. In response to threats on his life and fear in the movement, King said this:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... I just want to do God's will. And [God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”

Beloved, the promised land is a place where everyone has what they need, where there is water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, and a home for the refugee. Where all creatures, human and non-human, know God's love. And it's just over the ridge. The mountaintop allows us to glimpse it, and that glimpse helps us draw our map. To plan our path with God beside us, so that even if we don't get there, our children and their children will.

We need the peace and courage of the mountain to get where we're going—to address the climate crisis, and racial injustice, and economic exploitation, and a world at war. We need vision. We need each other. We need love. We need God. If we are to embody the prophetic, to call for love and justice where there is none, to advocate for change in a system ingrained in every aspect of our lives, we will have to journey to the mountain and pray. We will have to devote ourselves to contemplation. We will have to learn to value stillness. And we will have to come back down.

Friends, go to the mountaintop. Come and tell us what you see. Tell us what you feel. Tell us what you'll do.

Amen.