

“Remember the Mountaintop When You’re in the Valley”
Luke 9:28-36

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The story before the story goes like this: Jesus had gathered the disciples, calling them from their homes and their families and their work to follow him out into the world. Together they teaching whoever would listen. Soon crowds were gathering. The disciples were amazed but they were also tired, so one evening they asked Jesus to send away the crowds, just this once, but Jesus said no. The people were hungry. Jesus said, “Let’s feed them.” And somewhere, someway, five thousand people were fed from five loaves and two fish.

Through miracle filled moments like this, the disciples slowly realized this prophet they were following was more than a prophet. They understood him to be the Messiah or Son of God. When they said as much to Jesus, he taught them more, reminding them that according to scripture the Messiah must undergo great suffering, be rejected and betrayed, and be killed before being resurrected.

I imagine what must have gone through the disciples’ minds as they grappled with this new information. If Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and they were his followers, that would mean one day they would witness his suffering, his rejection, and his death. Where would they see themselves in that narrative? Would they already be worrying they might be the one to reject him? Would they be questioning each other’s faith and loyalty? Would they be pre-grieving at the great loss that was to come?

This story, this conversation, is the last one recorded before Jesus takes three of those disciples and goes up on the mountain to pray. It is the last conversation before our story today begins. A week has passed but if you’ve ever been given a blow of foreboding information, you

know a week is nothing to lessen the sting of anticipation. The disciples carry their anxiety and worries with them up that mountain. Jesus's agenda is a time of pray, but what those disciples are praying for is a revelation that what Jesus has said is going to happen will not happen after all. They are praying for divine intervention. They might be praying that they can stay up on that mountain, in the shelter of a quiet cave, away from the crowds, away from the demands of discipleship, away from the sequence of events yet to unfold that would take their teacher and friend away from them.

Their mountaintop experience was a time of refuge and rest. If Jesus had lived in Michigan, instead of a mountain, they would have go to their cottage up north. Or perhaps if it had been the end of a very long and snowy February, they would have been heading south to someplace warm and sunny with poor wifi so they could properly disconnect.

And on that mountaintop, while they were resting and coming to terms with who Jesus was and what he would one day go through, something happens. The three disciples see Jesus transform such that he shines and dazzles before them, surrounded by glory. They witness Jesus talking to their ancestors, Moses and Elijah. They hear the voice of God saying about Jesus, 'This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.' Some scholars have interpreted the words as "This is my Son, the beloved," mirroring the earlier proclamation from heaven when Jesus was baptized.

Whatever the phrasing was, this much is clear: their beliefs that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, have been confirmed. And yes, that means there will be suffering. There will be death. There will be grief. But that is only part of the story. On the mountaintop they reminded that in following Jesus, there is glory, or a dazzling beauty that will awe them. In following Jesus there is a connection to their past, to their ancestors and their traditions and history. In following Jesus there is a reminder of what it means to be beloved - a reminder that God was right there

with them. And if God was with them on that mountaintop, then surely God would come with them back down it.

The disciples' mountaintop moment offered more than rest - it was rejuvenating. It allowed the disciples to see through their grief and fear and anxiety to encounter something glorious. It reoriented them toward Jesus - reminded that they were following him because of his teachings and his healing and his love. They remembered that even though there would one day be death, there was also life. They left the mountaintop, and they returned to the valley where people would need them and the crowds would exhaust them, but they took the memory of the mountaintop with them. They took the memory of the dazzling glory before them, of the love they witnessed, and it shaped what came next. It made them more able to face the fear, to find comfort in the grief, to choose life when death threatened to overwhelm them.

We need those mountaintop moments, because none of us can stay in that place. Eventually we descend the mountain into the valleys. Eventually we return to the places that bring pain and stress and sorrow with them. Sometimes we know to anticipate where those places are and how they will manifest, but many other times we don't. We don't always know what valley is waiting for us. It's not always a clearcut path from mountaintop to valley floor. Sometimes it feels like we were shoved off the mountain instead of a gradual descent.

When that happens, what will we remember from the mountaintop? What will we carry with us into the places that fill us with trepidation or that we try our hardest to avoid? What will give us comfort in the midst of grief? Where will we find strength in the midst of hardship?

This week the national and international news has been filled with valleys, with places so low those of us who are distant witnesses are filled with dismay and a sense of helplessness. I read about transgender youth in Texas who have had gender-affirming healthcare outlawed for

them. I listened as the Attorney General and Governor of Texas called on citizens and teachers to turn in the parents and doctors of trans youth who dare to support them by providing lifesaving care. I read testimonies of families who fear for the future and safety of their children. What will they carry with them into this excruciating valley they find themselves in? Will they feel the forces of advocacy working to protect their kids against this injustice? Will they find the care they need to be affirmed? Will they find communities of safety and love?

And in Europe, we have watched in horror as Russian forces invaded the Ukraine. We watched videos of families make decisions to flee or stay, or separate from each other, as fighting and gunfire exploded into their streets. What will take Ukrainians through the valley of war? Where will they find their strength and resilience? What will remind them to seek out life and peace even as death and conflict surround them? How will those of us who are bystanders across the ocean or across the border choose to stand up for justice and peace in this moment? Where will we find the courage to say no to war and urge our government to move to nonviolent action?

The valleys surround us, and so we look back on those mountaintop experiences. We visualize them in our minds. We hold them close in our hearts. We remember the places of rest and rejuvenation. We remember those places and people that reminded us who we are, what we believe in, and what we are called to do. We remember whose we are, God's beloved people, called to serve and called to live life to its fullest, even in the face of death and destruction. To live a life committed to radiating love for all people, to live a life that follows in Jesus' footsteps, a life where if someone is hungry, we feed them. If someone is thirsty, we offer them something to drink. If someone is a refugee, we offer them shelter.

We tell this sacred mountaintop story - of Jesus and his disciples getting away and resting, of Jesus' glory being revealed - we tell this story every single year before Lent begins. Lent is our wilderness season in the church. It is six weeks in the valley, a time of reflection and repentance, a time of prayer and learning. This mountaintop story always comes right before Lent begins, because when we step into the wilderness, we need the memory of the mountaintop, of glory and the love of God to carry us through the six weeks of Lent, to make sure we are still here come Easter morning.

This Lent our church's theme is THIRSTING. In worship each week we will explore the things we thirst for in the wilderness: abundance, awe, renewal, a vision, and mercy. We enter into the wilderness season of Lent remembering our own mountaintop experiences - the ancestors that give us courage, the friends that traveled up and down the mountain with us, the moments we have witnessed God's love before us.

Memories are powerful - we carry them in our bodies and they shape who we are and how we experience the world. That mountaintop memory for the disciples would have allowed them to follow Jesus back down into a dangerous future, into the last days of his ministry, through his death so that they might be there at the resurrection, that they might meet his spirit on the road to Emmaus and break bread with him over a fire. The memories of when Jesus' glory was revealed to them shaped their call and purpose, shaped their discipleship. Even though they had to descend into the valley, they carried that transformative memory with them.

I have one more story to share with you, a story of how a mountaintop memory was the source of great courage. Last week I was at a conference for modern quilters. There are a lot of definitions of what makes a quilt modern - color, patterns, or better yet, the deconstruction of

traditional patterns, and a consistent theme of using quilts to directly address the issues of our time, including justice issues.

At QuiltCon I saw a special retrospective exhibit of quilts by a designer I am a big fan of, Latifah Saafir. Latifah is a Los Angeles based Black quilter and designer and the co-founder of the Modern Quilt Guild that I belong to. In 2019 Latifah was invited, through an organization called the Social Justice Sewing Academy, to make a memorial quilt for the family of a young Black man who was killed by police violence. The man, Steven Taylor, was killed in a Walmart in Oakland, CA when police claimed to confuse their taser with a gun. Latifah received a box of Steven's clothing, t-shirts, sports jerseys, and lots of jeans. She made a beautiful quilt for Steven's Grandma Addie and for his two sons so that they might have a tangible way of wrapping themselves in Steven's love and finding comfort under the layers of familiar fabric.

When she was finished and the quilts had been gifted, Latifah was left with a pile of scraps, mostly parts of the jeans that were too torn and delicate to be sewn into the quilts. The scraps felt too sacred to throw away so Latifah sat with them and wondered what they might become. Soon she envisioned a new quilt, this one a large wall hanging that would preserve the delicate denim. She based the quilt on a log cabin block - a quilting block made of rectangle strips that is balanced between light and dark fabrics. She sorted the strips of denim according to their color value and started sewing them together. As it grew, she shaped it into a fist, the kind we associate with Black power. When it came time to sew the knuckles of the fingers perched atop the palm of the fist, Latifah chose the most torn of the fabric, using the frayed threads to create movement. The threads echoed the lines that stretch across clenched fingers in a fist. For the background, Latifah chose white and cream fabrics, echoing the log cabin block but doing so in such a way that it looks like this giant fist is bursting out of the block at the viewer.

When Latifah finished the quilt, she showed it to Grandma Addie who said, “I have just the spot for this on my wall.” Latifah said that even though no one had requested she make this quilt, when she was making it, she knew it didn’t belong to her. She knew that it belonged to Steven’s family. If the first quilts were for comfort, this one was for courage. To remind Steven’s family that they come from a line of Black leaders who speak out against injustice and choose life even in the face of systemic racism. Grandma Addie has become an activist, speaking about Steven’s life and calling for an end to institutional violence against Black folks. When she looks at this quilt, she remembers the grandson she loved. She remembers why she is fighting. She remembers the ancestors that surround her. Steven’s life was a mountaintop memory. He had his ups and downs, but his memory is one of love. His family is choosing to honor that love by working for justice.

Mountaintop experiences change us. They are moments that reveal to us a new truth or point us toward our purpose or remind us of God’s love - those are the moments that shape who we are. When we enter into the valley of death and war and hate and grief, we need those memories. We need to carry them with us to remind us of who we are, to remind us that God is with us. We need to remind each other as we travel those valley roads together - to say, “I was there too. I saw what you saw. I remember. It was glorious. It was love. It was God’s love revealed.” May it be so.