

Last Epiphany February 27, 2022
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When Mountains are Made Low
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Did you notice both of today's readings feature mountains? We heard Moses went down a mountain in the Old Testament reading and Jesus went up a mountain with three of his disciples in the Gospel. Mountains are mentioned more than any other geographical feature in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. It was on a mountain top that Noah's ark came to rest as the flood waters receded. It was on a mountain that Abraham learned about God's grace after being tested. It was on a mountain that Moses received the 10 Commandments from God, and it was on a mountain that the prophet Elijah felt God pass by in holy silence.

In all these stories, mountains were not only places where people encountered the awesome power and presence of God, it is where they experienced the liberation – the freedom – that comes from following God. This is not the freedom to do whatever someone wants. That is not freedom, but a form of selfishness where a person is not free, but controlled by their desires, prejudices, arrogance, and ignorance that most of the time only leads to injustice, suffering, and even death. The freedom that comes from following God is the freedom from selfishness and greed.

When the ark came to rest on the mountain, it was the beginning of a fresh start. People were free to live under the promise God will not destroy the earth by flood, and they were free to live the same promise to not destroy one another. The mountain where Moses encountered God features prominently in the story of Exodus, the people of Israel's journey from bondage under Pharaoh of Egypt to being people free to worship God in their own land. The commandments Moses brought down the mountain weren't meant to be restrictions; they were guidance on how to live as God's people. But people have a way of taking something that was intended to be freeing or liberating and making it constricting, that is why freedom is often rejected for selfishness.

Sometimes, though, someone does get it. Someone understands receiving God's love and following the way of Jesus is liberating. The late Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor and former writer in residence at Valparaiso University realized this when he and his wife had an encounter with God and a mountain.

This mountain is none other than the great one, Denali, in Alaska where Walter and his wife were on vacation and discerning if they should move to a new city. This move meant significant changes for them and their family, and they weren't sure it was the right thing to do. They were praying for God to tell them if they should move or not, and God was not responding to this prayer.

Despite the spiritual nature of their time in Alaska, Walter and his wife did not climb the mountain. Instead, a bush pilot flew them to Denali in his small plane, so they could see the mountain from the air. The pilot got so close to the mountain that, as Walter described in his book *Whole Prayer*, he was terrified by its enormity. The sheer size and wildness of the mountain made him tremble at his own smallness and lack of control. The frightening experience revealed to him why mountains are places where people encounter God. The size and wildness of the mountain reminded Walter God is much bigger and wilder and powerful than he is and could ever imagine being.

But it wasn't until Walter and his wife were driving to the city of Anchorage that he realized the true lesson of the mountain and God. He wrote the drive was a stressful one over icy, snow-covered roads in a snowstorm where the road was nearly impossible to see let alone navigate. They had to get to Anchorage by a certain time, so it was not an option to stop. Eventually the snow let up enough for him to see better. He stopped the car, and they got out to stretch and breath and let the stress go. When he turned around Walter saw the great mountain Denali behind them. His wife said, "It's been here with us the whole time just like God has been here with us." Later, she expressed what Walter was thinking, that revelation was an answer to their prayer about relocating and she said, "It's all right Wally, we can go to a new place." He heard freedom in the word: *can*. Not must. Can. That was the answer to their prayer. They were free to choose because God is with them and always will be. There is no country or city or town or valley or river or plain or road or forest or mountain where God is not. Experiencing the awesomeness of God on the mountain made them realize God answers prayers with what God wants us to know, not always what we ask. God answered Walter's prayer of what choice to make by saying God is with them wherever they are. That means even if they made the wrong choice for them, God would still be with them, and God has a way of redeeming those choices, and that realization is liberating.

This brings us to another mountain; the one Jesus went up in this morning's Gospel. We heard the disciples Jesus brought with him had a terrifying experience there, not unlike Walter Wangerin's experience with Denali. And perhaps that is the point. In his prayer, Jesus embraced that wildness and tremendousness of God and through that Love of God came to understand what was next for him: a

new journey of liberation for all people. Not from slavery under Pharaoh, but freedom from sin that does whatever it wants, a horrible greed that gobbles up goodness and love and leaves so much suffering in its wake. A selfish greed that will even take the life of another without remorse.

As Jesus went down the mountain after his transfiguration, he also continued to manifest the Kingdom of God or Heaven here on earth by fulfilling the promise of the prophets that God will bring the mountains down and lift the valleys up. This equalizing isn't about physically destroying geographical features on earth, it's what Walter Wangerin and his wife experienced when the snowstorm subsided, and they saw the mountain and realized there is no place God isn't. God is everywhere: where there is peace, where there is war, where there is joy, where there is suffering, where there is growth, where there is decline, where there is conflict, where there is anxiety, where there is boredom or tedium, where there is fear. God is with us no matter where we are, which doesn't mean we are free to be selfish or our choices don't matter. It means we are free to follow God's ways of loving God and our neighbors, even when it is hard or challenging.

Today is the last Sunday in the Season of Epiphany. During this season, we've explored the ways God's love manifests in Jesus and how we can shine that same love into the world. Now we turn our faces, with Jesus, to another hill, one with a cross, where that movement of mountains and valleys meeting truly starts in Jesus' choice to embody the love of God even when he was being violently abused and killed. We also turn our faces to the beginning of another Season in the Church Year. Lent begins in only a few days. A season of ashes and naming our need for forgiveness. Some see this time as the Church's attempt to control lives or force good people to give up simple pleasures. But Lent is not about sacrificing ice cream or screen time. It's a reminder that freedom of God is freedom from those impulses that we let control us. And invites us to look up from ourselves to see God in the mountains and valleys and neighbors around us.

As we come to the end of the Season of Epiphany, we do so on a mountain, not a literal one, but a meaningful one, none the less. One that manifests God's love so that we are free to recognize this Love with us any and every time and place we happen to be.