

February 14, 2010 - Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a])

Hear again these words from the Gospel according to Luke, "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray." They went up on the mountain to pray. Jesus could have taken Peter and John and James to the synagogue to pray. Could have taken them to a secluded room, a prayer room somewhere to pray. Could have taken them anywhere to pray. He takes them to the mountain to pray. And many of us have heard this story so many times it's easy to kind of gloss over that little detail about the mountain. It just seems logical that Jesus would choose a mountain as the place for prayer. Mountains have wonderful inspiring views. They're secluded, and in scripture, God's always talking to people on mountains. Got Moses in the Old Testament lesson today talking to God on Mount Sinai. Elijah, the prophet Elijah, who makes an appearance in the Gospel with Moses, also has an encounter with God on a mountain as he flees persecution. So we might not linger over this little detail about the mountain because, well, it just makes sense.

But I want us to linger for a moment on this mountain. Mountain is a place for prayer and for the revealing of God's glory. Because the mountain is a place. It's a place on the earth. It's a physical spot. And for those of us who are tempted to think of God as a spiritual being out there somewhere, the mountain reminds us that God loves the physical. God loves the earthly. And Jesus, who is God in the flesh of the dust, shows that God loved the creation so much God actually became a part of that creation. By going up on a mountain to pray, Jesus and the disciples are not having an out-of-body experience, but an in-bodied, earthbound moment. A holy moment on holy ground.

The mountain is also not made by human hands. A mountain is beyond human creation or imagination. No temple or skyscraper can compare to the glory and the strength of a mountain. Taking his disciples to this place, Jesus is inviting them to step away from the human-made world to be fully in the presence of God as God is revealed in creation. I know many of us have come to know God in creation whether it's on a mountain top or at the sea shore, in our own backyard. As a young man I remember climbing the mighty Mount Mitchell here in North Carolina -- tallest mountain east of the Mississippi -- and getting to the top of it and feeling this wonderful sense that I had drawn a little bit closer to God. But also on top of that mountain I saw some disturbing sights. I saw dead trees, trees scarred by acid rain. And it began for me an awareness that human activity was having an impact on the mountains and the creation of God.

Many of us have been deeply troubled by other news about mountains. Mountains which have known the covering of snow for thousands if not millions of years are being transfigured. And instead of becoming more brilliant and bright, they're losing their shine. Rising global temperatures are melting the snow and ice from their slopes. The mountains of ice known as glaciers are shrinking and the melted water is slowly causing ocean levels to rise. And most scientists who study the earth and its climate attribute climate change to human activity, especially the burning of coal and oil products for energy. This is not news to most of us. And there are also a few scientists who say that global warming is just a natural phenomenon, that it's not caused by human activity. But my own sense is that if there's any chance that our actions are causing a change this colossal, we need to do as much as we can to stop it.

Mountain tops are being removed in our country in order to dig for more coal and we can't attribute that to anything but ourselves. We're the ones who are taking the tops off the mountains. And in addition to the problems created by burning coal, the pollution from the mines threatens waterways and life downhill including human life. It's hard to believe that we humans, we tiny fragile humans, can cause so much damage. But the mountains are speaking. Are we listening?

Now many of you may be asking, "Yes, we know about global warming. We hear about it in the news. But what does it have to do with Jesus? Why bring it up in the context of Christian worship?" Well, the word I want us to remember this morning is covenant. Although it doesn't appear in the Gospel this morning, the concept of a covenant, a binding agreement between God and God's people, is all over this Gospel. The setting of a mountain - covenant. The appearance of Moses who received the commandments from God - covenant. Elijah who called God's people back into faithful compliance - covenant. The reference to Jesus' departure and his mission - covenant. Jesus is the son of God, the one chosen as the voice said, to renew the covenant between God and God's people through his life, death and resurrection. When we get together every Sunday, we are also renewing that covenant, that binding contract with God through our worship, through our hymns, our prayers and especially through those earthly sacraments. In the tangible, visible earthly signs of bread and water and wine, we enact the outward and visible earthly signs of God's inward and spiritual grace so that we can remember and live out the agreements we have with God. God is our God, God loves us, we are God's people here on the earth - covenant.

Part of being the people of God is taking care of what God has given us. Part of the covenant is remembering all this earthly stuff does not belong to us. It belongs to God and God loves it. God has loaned it to us so that we might prosper, but we have been greedy in our quest for prosperity. We have allowed our own sense of power to push us to compete with God. When our activity literally threatens to bring the mountains down upon our heads, we have gone too far. We come to this sanctuary because we have a covenant with God, but this is no sanctuary from what we have done to break the covenant. When we come to praise God's greatness, we cannot hide from our failed attempts to rival God's power. We cannot confess our sins without remembering, for example, an avalanche of coal sludge in Kentucky. And while those of us here individually didn't push that coal down the mountain, we through our activity are connected to those atrocities. We are part of a collective body whose actions as a whole have consequences that contradict our covenant with God.

Now, I know it's been cold recently. And I know the people under snow in Washington and Baltimore are probably saying, "Where's global warming?" But the people in the Arctic Circle who can no longer cross the frozen ice because it's simply not there anymore are not saying anything like that. The people in the South Pacific Islands who may lose their entire homelands because of rising sea levels are not questioning global climate change. Our bishops went to Lambeth Conference in 2008 and came back with reports from the bishops of Anglican churches in the South Pacific Islands saying, "Please do something before we literally go under."

Jesus summed up the covenant when He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your strength and this is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When it's even remotely possible that our collective actions might have such tragic consequences for others, I think we are bound by covenant to change how we act. And there's good news that we are. Many of us are trying to make changes. At St. Luke's we have a Green Team now. I don't know if you've heard of our Green Team. Evaluating our buildings' energy systems, seeking ways to use less energy. We will follow the resolution passed at the most diocesan convention discouraging the use of bottled water because of all the energy that it takes to produce and dispose of water bottles. We hosted a conference in Johnson Hall in 2008 on climate change. And the dean of the Nicholas School for the Environment at Duke said that something that all of us could do is reduce the amount of meat we eat and that would have a lot of impact.

But for any action we take I want us to be clear about the reasons. We're not trying to save the planet. We're not trying to save ourselves. God's done that already. But as Christians we have a covenant of faithful love to God and each other. So we will reduce our carbon emissions not just because the scientists say it's a good idea, but because we have a covenant. We will save energy because we have a covenant. We will consume less and give more because we have a covenant. The covenant began when God created us. It continued in God's chosen people and in Jesus Christ and it continues in the church and in our mission. Our mission to spread God's love to the whole world. The whole world that includes those who are suffering the effects of climate change.

Covenant is good news. It holds us accountable. But it also gives us the hope that God is still speaking. The hope that God still loves us. We are still God's people. As the season of Lent approaches this week, Ash Wednesday, a time of self examination and repentance, perhaps we can remember the mountains. Places in God's creation where God is still speaking. Where God is still transfiguring, changing us from glory to glory, empowering us to do the work God has given us to do, caring for God's creation, caring for one another. As we approach this time of Lent, give thanks for the covenant. Give thanks for our Lord Jesus Christ who went up on the mountain to pray. We do likewise.