

“Make a Little Mountainhouse In Your Soul”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Transfiguration Sunday

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2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

Who among you are watching the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang? These sports have already brought us up a mountain: a mountain dazzling with white from the ice and snow, a mountain where no one wears ordinary clothes but uniforms, clothes that transform bodies into instruments that test the limits of human strength and endurance. In Pyeongchang there is a mountain dazzling with glory from the hard-earned achievements of the world's best athletes. In the mountains in Pyeongchang, we find collaboration and connection that open our hearts towards the possibilities of peace, in ways that politics do not always allow or encourage. As I watched Maame Biney win the silver medal in the short track speed-skating event, I was moved by the pride and joy of her father who jumped up in the stands with his arms up. Maame Biney, a Ghanaian, skated under the US flag and is one of many athletes who remind us of our intersecting identities that bring together countries and continents. But the most powerful and hopeful part of the Olympics so far for me has been seeing the united Korean team. I watched the women's hockey game Saturday morning between Switzerland and Korea. There were obvious advantages since Switzerland has a long and competitive history with ice hockey; Korea would get its first gold through Lim Hyo-jun in short-track skating, not through ice hockey. But though the Korean Ice Hockey team did not win the gold, they won our hearts, as they merged women from North and South Korea in the game, and were encouraged by dozens of North Korean cheerleaders dressed in red, waving a white flag with the blue

shape of the unified Korean Peninsula, shouting at first, in Korean, “One Korea!”, then “Win, Win!” and then, when it was pretty clear what the outcome of the game would be, “Cheer Up!” At the Opening Ceremonies, South Korean President Moon Jae-in sat only seats away from Kim Yo-jong, younger sister of North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un, and they shared a handshake and then came the prospects of a shared summit. There was an interesting frame of US Vice President Mike Pence also sitting a few seats away from Kim Yo-jong, but that moment did not center around the US; rather it showed the two Koreas as able to broker a relationship regardless of US interests or intervention.

Today in scripture we ascend a mountain with Peter, John, and Jesus. I wonder whether this is the mountain Jesus liked to visit when he left the crowds so many times, whether this wasn't the first time he stood on the mountain alongside Moses and Elijah. On this mountain we find dazzling white-- Jesus' clothes lose the dinginess of daily life and turn into a lustre even brighter than bleached clothing. On this mountain we also find glory, as a voice from the cloud announces, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” On this mountain, we also find company that amazes: for Jesus, he is joined by Moses and Elijah. We remember Moses, who also met God on a mountaintop, as the great liberator of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Moses, who struck the waters of the Red Sea with his staff and, by the power of God, caused the sea to part so that the Hebrews could safely cross. Elijah the prophet, as we see in the Kings passage, also struck a body of water; in the case of Elijah the water was the River Jordan, and when Elijah struck in with his rollerblading-up mantle, the water parted and he and his friend Elisha, who would become his successor, crossed to the other side. We know Jesus was baptized in that same river, The Jordan. Jesus did not stand alone, and we remember too how much more capable we are of experiencing God's glory when we do not go it alone. As we prepare to have our Annual Meeting today, we know what power the church has to draw us beyond an individual experience of God to the rich communion we can know when we choose to be part of the body of Christ.

As for Peter and John, they want to capture this moment and hold it in place for all time. Peter tells Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” In a similar way, each time Elijah tells Elisha that the Lord will send him away, Elisha insists, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not lead you.” Each time the company of prophets going with them tells Elisha, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” and Elisha responded, “Yes I know; keep silent.” It is as if Elisha longs to capture the moment and connection with Elijah forever. And yet, Elijah sure enough ascends in a whirlwind into heaven, leaving Elisha to literally carry his mantle.

If the Olympics continues with the sense of goodwill that was portrayed at the start of the games, we too may have a sense of wanting to capture the moment, to not leave the mountaintop-- a place dazzling with glory, a place of peace, and a place where unexpected connections are discovered.

But in a couple weeks all athletes will leave the mountains. The nations will scatter and return to old political patterns and battles. And Peter, John and Jesus will likewise leave the mountain, and we know what will happen next, as our church leaves the land of Alleluias and heads into the season of Lent, walking toward the shadow of the cross.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright said about this gospel passage, “The scene at the transfiguration offers a strange parallel and contrast to the crucifixion. If you’re going to meditate on the one, you might like to hold the other in your mind as well, as a sort of backdrop. Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands, representing the

level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there, he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus. Here a voice from God himself declares that this is his wonderful son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God's son."¹

There is so much opposing symmetry to these two stories that it seems they belong to one another, as much as yin belongs to yang.

Elisha asked the prophet Elijah, before he ascended to heaven, "Give me a double share of your spirit." And indeed Elisha continued the witness, the power, and the spirit of Elijah's prophecy, even after Elijah had left.

There is a song by the band *They Might Be Giants* called "Make a Little Birdhouse in Your Soul." I believe scripture calls us to make a little mountainhouse in your soul. Peter meant well but he had the wrong idea. We do not need a permanent mountain retreat where we can keep Jesus. Jesus is meant to be carried with us in our souls. We can carry within us a space that the mountain offers: a place where we might find peace, a place where we might experience God's glory; a place where surprising things can happen, a place where we move from individualism to intimate community as we meet others whom God has invited to stand with us. Even when we fear war, or stand under the shadow of the cross, if we carry that mountain retreat inside our souls we have a vision that helps us transcend and even transform that which we fear.

Beloved of God, Christ has prepared a mountain retreat within you. It is not on a mountaintop. It is not in a temple far away. It is within you. But it is not a retreat to let you hide from the world. Rather, it is a retreat that can restore you to glory, so that you might share that glory in the broken places of yourself and in the world. Perhaps you cannot find the key to this

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*

mountain retreat. Perhaps you've assumed the retreat is for someone else-- Moses, Elijah, Jesus-- but surely not you. Won't you see, however, that Jesus lived his life, and Jesus died his death, showing us that he is among us; he invites us; and he wants to share his life with us.

In a minute we will have an anointing by the deacons with oil. Usually we invite you to pray for healing, for yourself, for loved ones, and for the world. But if you need to in this time, I also invite you to approach this anointing as a way of finding that mountain peak within you, where you might be restored to glory and restored to Christ. Alleluia, Amen.