

“Almost Heaven”

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February 27, 2022: Transfiguration Sunday

John Denver never went to West Virginia. And yet, the lyrics to his song, *Country Roads*, appeal to fans everywhere from Appalachia to Japan. “Almost heaven, West Virginia, Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River. Life is old there, older than the trees. Younger than the mountains, growing’ like a breeze. Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong, West Virginia, mountain mama, take me home. Country roads.

You would think that John Denver had made a home in West Virginia, but he hadn’t even set foot there. Still, the longing for that mountain home is so convincing, any listener can easily identify that they, too, long to have a home on a mountaintop somewhere.

In the Holy Land today, many places that appear to be mountains are actually what in Arabic and Hebrew is called a *tel* (or *tell*). A tel is a mountain or mound that is formed from the crumbling of ancient cities and ruins. As each generation passes, their homes, tools, cookware, places of worship, crumble to dust. With each layer, the land gets higher. Tels are an archeologist’s wonderland; reaching into the dust, they can unearth new understanding about how people lived and what they valued. If we were to reach into the dust of the generations upon which we stand, what ancestors would you want to teach you, or to at least bring you a vision surrounded in light?

We don’t know whether the Transfiguration happened on a naturally formed mountain, or a *tel*, but we can imagine that Jesus’ appearances with two of the great ancestors of the Hebrew faith had enormous significance. Moses— who first encountered God on a mountain, through a bush that was burning and not consumed, and later, again conversed with God on the mountain, writing down the covenant God would make with God’s people; each time he descended the mountain, he had to cover in a veil, because the glory on his face shone too brightly for human eyes. Moses’s relationship with God showed liberation; that God is moved by the cries of the oppressed and longs for their freedom. This relationship also exposes God’s deep desire to be in relationship; Moses’ careful efforts to record the covenant on Sinai brokered the ways that, as God said, “I will be their God and they shall be my people.”

Elijah, a prophet of many generations later, spoke to God on that same mountain and brought the Hebrew people into a monogamous relationship with God. Not only would God be the one god whom the people would worship and adore out of many options; Elijah brought the understanding that God was the *only* God, the God of all people and all things, and not just the favored God among many gods.

No wonder Jesus often went to the mountain— alone— to pray. Maybe he was talking to his spiritual ancestors, asking for signs on the path that he knew would be a difficult journey. Maybe he wondered how he might further reveal what kind of relationship God seeks with us. And maybe because so much of this wondering is about relationship, he brought some disciples along: James, John, and Peter.

That longing to make a home on the mountaintop was the first, groggy yet amazed response that Peter with his companions James and John made when, heavy with sleep, they witnessed Jesus appear alongside their ancestors in the faith, Moses and Elijah. “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” Peter said.

Peter senses there is something about being on the mountain that puts us a little closer to God. I mean, don't people everywhere feel that? From yodelers in the European Alps to Chinese Shan shui watercolors of mountains, many cultures note something spiritual about being on a mountain, whether literally or figuratively. My wife Chris is beginning training next week in mountaineering, because she plans to summit the glacial Mt. Baker in Washington State next fall. She hopes for a transcendent experience at the mountain peak, something that she can return to in her mind for the rest of her life, and she hopes for the satisfaction of knowing that she achieved this accomplishment, as a testimony that she can do hard things. I *know* she can do hard things, so I hope for a trip where she doesn't get injured.

When we talk about spirituality, we often expect a mountain-top experience with God. We want a rush of wonder. We want a revelation. We want clouds and light. We want to start planning our vacation dream-home. I suspect some of you think that I— someone who sensed and followed a call to ministry— spend lots of time in an ecstatic, mountain-top connection with God. ***But the truth is***, finding God is more like walking barefoot on a dusty, winding path. Often we are so focused on finding our destination, that we fail to notice where God shows up all along the way: in the people walking alongside you; or those on the side of the road; perhaps God even shows up in an ant bringing a crumb to its colony so that they might break bread together. Sometimes, it is the ability to notice the holy at work in the ordinary that helps us see glory.

Instead of building houses for holy people on mountaintops, we might support the building of affordable housing in our community, for people who are also holy but may not be seen as such. Instead of waiting for light to beam on you and a cloud to cover you, we can let our lights shine by sharing the gifts the Spirit has already set within us. Instead of keeping silent as Peter, James and John did, instead of hoarding Jesus to ourselves, we can share good news and welcome extravagantly. Instead of going it alone, we can invite our ancestors through memory and our friends through contact, and discover that sometimes God shows up differently when we are together than when we are on our own.

Today we ordain and install people whom the Spirit has called to serve the church, people who said yes to that call. That doesn't mean they are walking around on a mountaintop all the time. But they do form a community, one that offers care, and one that offers guidance, and in doing these two things they give us a glimpse to how we might find God when we come together as church. We don't build permanent houses for them; their terms are one to three years, and they can't serve more than 2 terms in a row without taking a break, so that someone else can step into that call. Let's bless them in their leadership, and discover how God is still showing up for us in our church.