

“Mountaintop View”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Transfiguration Sunday, Feb. 19, 2023

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Exodus 24:12-18  
Matthew 17:1-9

Not only is today Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany— the season of light. Epiphany began on January 6. On Epiphany Sunday, we told the story of the magi, following the star— that great, mysterious light in the sky that led to the manger in Bethlehem, where the baby Jesus lay.

The whole season of Epiphany has been a celebration of light— from the star at Bethlehem, to Jesus at the Transfiguration, with his face shining like the sun, and his clothes dazzling bright. This season of light ironically takes place during the darkest time of the year; when Epiphany began, sunset in Leonia was at 4:43 pm— but it is getting later. Tonight, the sun is due to set at 5:35 p.m. Last night we walked the dog in Overpeck Park during sunset, and I could see about 8 different magnificent colors in the sky as it yielded from light, to darkness.

The days will keep stretching longer as we head to summer, filling the world with light. But first, we will enter another season of darkness as Lent begins this Wednesday. I know that many aspects of our culture separate understanding to see light as good, darkness as bad. But just because culture accepts this view, doesn't mean it is so. The church seasons of Advent and Lent are seasons of darkness, in a good way. Like the night that allows rest, they are seasons of renewal. In the darkness, we cannot see everything. But it allows us to accept sacred mystery. Darkness can also evoke the womb of new birth. I look forward to this season of darkness ahead.

But today, we have one last shiny blast of light, with Jesus on the mountaintop just blinging, and with a posse of homeboys, Moses and Elijah. It is so spectacular, that Peter, whom Jesus had brought up the mountain with James and John for a little spiritual retreat, started planning a tabernacle campground, to hold onto these spiritual ancestors as long as is earthly possible.

Who among us has had a mountaintop, spiritual experience? That is to say, who among you has had an experience that left you in profound contact with holiness? It doesn't have to be on a literal mountain. If you ask certain youth in our church about going to Camp Johnsonburg, you might hear about some mountaintop experiences. I heard that a member of our church took a 5 mile hike up a hill with his son, after coming near death from a heart attack less than 2 months ago. I wonder if he felt something holy about that, in his healed heart. I know I will be taking a few days in early March to travel for a spiritual writing conference. I look forward to that time when I might catch a glimpse of glory, or at least consider how to communicate what glory is like to you in the pews. Not only that, I hope for some sense of personal renewal for my own life from those days.

I am very much intrigued by a phenomenon I have been reading about, happening at a small, Christian college in Kentucky. At Asbury College, beginning on February 8, after a regularly scheduled chapel service, some students stuck around. They shared prayer, singing, and scripture. More people came. Day folded into night, and more people were there. For 11 days, praise, worship, and prayer continued happening, 24 hours a day, with thousands pouring in the chapel and filling 2 other overflow auditoriums as well. It showed up on social media, and people came to join them from far and near. No celebrity preachers came. There was no high tech lighting or powerpoint sermons, no rock star praise band. This was a revival for Generation Z, led by Generation Z, using simply their voices, their guitars, a box for drumming, their bodies for praise. It's still happening— though starting this weekend, they are scheduling a break during the night.

Those of us watching from afar keep trying to figure out what tent to put these young adults into. Tucker Carlson talked about it on his show— yet students declined to let him come because they don't want it politicized. Some LGBTQ evangelicals express hope, upon seeing other queer students lead music and testimony, that this might represent a more welcoming shift in evangelicalism. Others, who have been victimized by religiosity that manipulated them through strong emotional experience remain suspicious of the revival.

John Pavlovitz posted this:

Christians, you want to have a real “revival”?

Stop singing.

Start emulating Jesus.

Get out of the church building and go feed the hungry, heal the sick, care for the poor, welcome the immigrant, and love the least.

It takes no effort to sing.

Singing alone helps no one outside the building.

Leave the building.

Go and love.

Then, sing while you do.

Having had moments in my life where I have had a mountaintop experience of God, I don't want to be so quick to dismiss these students or cynical about their experience. I won't be so quick to decide what tent to put them in. Even the most dedicated among us to social justice and care of the poor need to have experiences that replenish and renew.

I think about how the generation of students at this college spent their high school years at the height of the pandemic. When they should have been enjoying casual chatting by their lockers, the bud of new romance, or the shared challenge of figuring out a science lab together, they were instead holed up in their rooms, sitting for hours on end, learning behind a screen, and missing out on American teenage rites of passage.

I think about research that came out last week about the levels of profound despair among American youth, especially among teenage girls, who have also experienced high levels of sexual violence. How black, brown, and Native American, and LGBTQ youth fare even worse. I think about how much social media has disembodied our human relationships and created a culture of constantly “comparing your body and your life to others and feeling that you come up wanting.” “It makes me feel like something’s wrong with myself,” said Kaya, a 14-year old girl (Donna St. George, Katherine Reynolds Lewis and Lindsey Bever, “The Crisis in American Girlhood” in Washington Post, Feb. 17, 2023). It’s like the Alleluias have been buried for these kids, but without a ritual timeline or community to let them back out again.

But on this college campus, clumped together at the revival: jumping in religious ecstasy, bodies bowed onto the floor in an outpouring of devotion before God, arms reaching into the air or draped over the shoulders of others, faces stained with tears while being held in the arms of others willing to carry their burdens, their joy, their faith, I think: of course. Here are people in need of a revival. Their neediness doesn’t have to mean God isn’t part of it, or that it’s all self-concocted. Perhaps we are all in need of an experience of revival, too. What would the Presbyterian version of such spirit-filled activity look like? I’ve been with you 7 years, but we still can’t agree on whether to clap on the beat, on the off-beat, or even whether to clap at all, much less feel free enough with our bodies to lift our hands – but that doesn’t have to keep us from a revival of the Spirit in our hearts and in our church. It’s our kids who have the courage to make sermons call-and-response; in those occasions when children stay for the entire worship service, rather than going to the Activity period, some have been known to interrupt this preacher with questions or commentary on the sermon. Maybe they will be the ones to lead our revival in the Spirit.

As for Peter, for James and John– they had recently been told by Jesus the landscape of their time with him: Jesus would go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. For Peter, this news was unacceptable. “God forbid it, Lord! This must not happen to you!” Jesus responded cryptically to him: “You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

What better place to catch a glimpse of divine things than on a mountaintop? Moses met God, through the burning bush on the mountaintop and yet again on the mountain when he received the covenant God would bring to the people. Elijah had an encounter of God on Mount Horeb, first in the sound of sheer silence, and then with a voice, offering Elijah direction and a partner at a point of despair in his role as a prophet.

You can look at the landscape from the ground, but your sight is limited. Trees get in the way. Buildings may block your view. Even the bend of the earth keeps you from seeing far. But climb a mountain? The trees and buildings become dots. The horizon becomes farther away as your height changes the perspective of the earth’s bend. A mountaintop view orients you to a different way of seeing. For Peter and James and John, their mountaintop view came with a reminder from Jesus to *not be afraid*, and a promise from God of Jesus’ belovedness. I like to

think they carried these reminders down the mountain and into the events that would follow. Maybe they even got a sense of their own belovedness before God.

Even when you cannot stay on the mountaintop forever, you come down seeing differently. If we weren't about to feast for the year of the Rabbit, I'd say we should all head on a hike up a mountain or a hill somewhere so we can be changed by it.

Instead I want to offer you the invitation to seek out the blessing of time on the mountain. It doesn't have to be a literal mountain. What fears or confusion or need do you bring to the mountain? How might your time there change you? Here is an invitation to meet God, or whatever messengers God may be sending you, on the mountain. It is an invitation to renewal. It is an invitation to be given a new perspective or view that can change how you see the ordinary and the challenges it brings. It is an invitation to not be afraid. It is an invitation to know the belovedness of Jesus Christ, and also of your own belovedness too.

You can't make a tent there and keep that experience boxed in. It has to be free, so that it can free you.