

**Rev. Mike Cole**  
**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**  
**March 2, 2025**  
**Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36**

**"Mountains and Valleys"**

Years ago, I drove through Death Valley while on vacation. It was in the middle of summer and the temperature was around 110. Everywhere I looked, I saw shades of black, brown and gray. It was a desolate and forbidding place, inhospitable to any living thing. In the middle of Death Valley is an oasis, aptly named Furnace Creek, that comes complete with date palms, a golf course and a hotel. At 190 feet below sea level, it's quite a contrast to the immediate surroundings of the valley. This particular spot in Death Valley offers relief from the harsh elements in the rest of the valley.

Most of us come to worship hoping to escape the harshness of the world or to be motivated to live a better life out there. The problem with those approaches is that they assume that the real world is somewhere other than in the world of worship. But I believe that worship, with its mystery, tradition and inspiration is at the heart of the real world for Christians. We come to worship not to escape the real world but to see it more clearly.

When Jesus took his three favored disciples up a mountain, it wasn't to escape the real world but to help them get a better perspective of it. A week before our lesson for today begins, Jesus predicted his own suffering, death and resurrection, culminating

with these words: “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” (*Luke 9:27*) Barely more than a week later, Jesus took three of those disciples who were standing there up a mountain to see the kingdom of God for what it was - a present reality that surrounded them all the time.

For Christians, worship is an essential part of living in the real world. Worship is what gives shape to life in the real world. Worship brings real life into focus because it opens us to the reality of the spiritual realm. The world tells us that the physical realm is the only realm that matters or even exists. But Jesus tells us that the spiritual realm co-exists with the physical; it is a parallel realm that is every bit as real as what we call the real world.

To prove his point, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain to give them a glimpse of the real spiritual world. Since Jesus was fully human and fully divine, he was perfectly able to live in both the physical and spiritual realms. We are limited in our perceptions and therefore have a hard time discerning the spiritual realm. In the same way that Jesus took the disciples up a mountain to put them in touch with the spiritual reality which surrounded them, worship takes us up a mountain of sorts to give us a peek at spiritual reality.

The first thing Jesus did on the mountain was to pray. Prayer is essential for connecting with spiritual reality. For many of us, prayer is an afterthought, something we do as a last resort, when all our other schemes and plans have failed. But for Jesus,

the one who was perfectly in tune with both the physical and spiritual realms, prayer was his first thought. If that's the beginning point for Jesus, it should be the beginning point for us, too.

The most amazing thing happened to Jesus while he was praying: "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." The change that transformed or transfigured Jesus came from the inside out, contrary to how many of us try to change or transform our lives. In other words, real transformation originates from God, who does have the power to change whatever we are willing to change, from the inside out.

Many of us give lip service to change. We express resolutions to lose weight, exercise more, control our temper, drink less, or go to church more. But when it comes time to put our change into action, we come up short because often we haven't prayed for change. Praying for a transformation from the inside out is risky business not because it puts God to the test, but because it puts us to the test. As long as we just talk about change over coffee instead of over folded hands, we can procrastinate and make excuses for ourselves. But praying for a transformation, a transfiguration, makes change a reality.

We don't really know what Jesus prayed for that day on the top of the mountain, but we do know what he got. He got a transfiguring experience that even the sleepy-headed disciples could see for themselves. When Peter, James and John awoke from their afternoon nap, not only did they behold Jesus'

transfigured appearance, but they also saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. Luke tells us that they were speaking with Jesus about his "departure." The Greek word Luke uses is "exodus." Jesus was about to embark on his own exodus, in which he would lead the people out of bondage to sin into the freedom of salvation. Moses, representing the law, and Elijah, representing the prophets, confirmed the reality that Jesus was the embodiment of the law and the prophets.

Jesus' appearance changed and his clothes became dazzling white, not because of any light that shone upon him, but because of a light that shone from within him. In spite of the fact that, at that moment, the future looked about as dark as any future could be, the vision within Jesus was bright and it made him shine. It would be perfectly understandable for Jesus to want to stay on the mountaintop where he was in perfect communion with God, but that was not his mission. His mission was in the valley.

Jesus knew when to climb a mountain to reestablish his connection with God. And he knew when to head down the mountain into the valley. He often retired to the mountains to reflect in their silent strength and communicate with God. He loved the mountains, but he lived in the valley.

There was an intimate connection between his visits to the mountains and his work in the valley. To the mountains he carried the pain, anguish and needs of the valleys; to the valleys he brought the peace and power of the mountains. On the mountain of worship, we get an opportunity to see the radiant splendor of God which equips us to live in the valley where evil forces its way

into our lives. We cannot linger on the mountain any more than Jesus did. The valley is what the mountain prepares us for.

The Transfiguration helped the disciples for the valley they were about to enter with Jesus. It was a deep valley of darkness the likes of which they had never known. There would be betrayal, denial and death in that valley. But they were better prepared for the valley because of the mountain. Upon the mountain they had seen the veil separating the physical from the spiritual realms parted for just a moment. And it was enough. It was enough to encourage them for life in the valley.

The climax of the Transfiguration came in a cloud which enveloped the disciples. Out of the cloud came the unmistakable voice of God giving the disciples then and all disciples now an invaluable confirmation and piece of advice - "This is my Son, my Chosen; **listen** to him."

Whenever we feel overshadowed by a cloud - a cloud of grief, a cloud of indecision, a cloud of despair, a cloud of turbulence, a cloud of disease, a cloud of uncertainty - we need to listen to Jesus. He alone has the words to comfort, reassure, encourage, strengthen, heal, and soothe us.

Listening is a fundamental part of prayer. Praying without listening is like going to a doctor without waiting for a diagnosis and prescription. Every time we pray, we must be prepared to listen to what God says. Every time we worship, we must be prepared to listen to how God would guide us. Every time we are on the mountain we need to listen to God's advice for the valley.

As wonderful as it is on the mountaintop - and it is wonderful to sense the mysterious divine presence in worship - we must go forth from this place into the valley below, where we are charged with the task of transforming it. But we go with the sure and certain conviction that Jesus Christ goes with us, just as he went into the valley with those first disciples.

However, we are not pledged to silence, as were those first disciples. We are free to tell the story throughout the valleys of this world, that in Jesus Christ the spiritual and physical realms have come together in a way that makes transformation a reality. This is good news, spectacularly good news to take to the valley people, who think that the valley is the only real world there is.

The light of Jesus Christ, revealed on the mountain, punches holes in the darkness of the valley. Our mission is to take the light of Christ from the mountaintop into every dark valley, where Jesus can shine. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**THE CHARGE:** Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen