

...because I've been to the mountaintop

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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On April 3, 1968 Rev. Martin Luther King spoke of the struggles then for civil rights – the marches, the arrests and suffering for racial justice. The fire hoses turned on the marchers. Looking back at the struggle he said:

[the authorities] didn't know history. [They] knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out...¹

There was danger that comes with living faithfully, truthfully. There is always danger inherent when we challenge human systems that control and oppress. Dr. King proclaimed, though, that there is a greater power than oppression that transcends the physics of death and destruction of human spirit.

That day before King was assassinated, he was warned of threats against his life. Like heroes of the Bible – Moses, Mary and the disciples – though King had seen glory, and he was not afraid:

.... I don't know what will happen now. (He said) we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop... and (God has) allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land.²

Embedded within Mark's story about that mountaintop encounter of Peter and James and John, the true power of Jesus seems to be two prominent truths.

First, following Jesus will lead us into moments of truth, and, very possibly, struggles in life that will call out of us courage that we did not know within us. You see, Jesus tells his disciples not to say anything of what they saw, then implied a journey to death of the Son of Man; but after the Son of Man is raised, then followers can tell the story of what they had seen on the mountaintop.

The disciples and people of Jesus' time certainly knew death. They knew suffering, and systems of human domination that oppressed the human spirit. They, and most of us, know and fear systems of death and domination that humans create. How much more is a person from the LGBTQ2+ community likely to understand that, and the First Peoples of this land who have waited too long to reclaim the land and justice that is rightfully theirs. People of colour who have to see news of another incident. In these tumultuous times the better angels of humankind seem too often muted by fearful systems.

Ah, but I didn't I refer to two truths that Mark seems to reveal in this story of human encounter with a transfigured Jesus. There, on that mountaintop was mystery, awe-inspiring, wonder-inspiring, even fear-inspiring.

¹ A transcript of Rev. Dr. King's speech can be found at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

² Ibid

I won't – I can't – explain it. It was a mysterious experience, a glimpse of a “physics of God” that transcends our human rationalizing. God's answer to human systems of fear and control is Life and Resurrection. Mountaintop moments – Dr. King proclaiming:

...because I have been to the mountaintop.

I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land.

He was not there, yet, but he had a glimpse of it.

Following Jesus, believing, does not immunize us from pain. In fact, I dare say that you and I are called by Jesus to be present in those places of hurt, feel one another's pain, and in our caring, our kind gestures, our empathy, we journey towards healing, we struggle for justice together.

In that mountaintop moment, that awe-inspiring moment, Peter babbles, and clamours for something he can do. There is fear and profound mystery up there on the mountain. Mystery, that a God so awesome seems to need to be with us. We are subject to earthly laws – gravity, aging. I'm coming to terms with both of those, I'll tell you, as I age. In those moments of struggle of life, and death, we pray together. We celebrate milestones like birth, and falling in love, and we hold one another in grief in times of death.

Punctuating our everyday struggles of human living are holy moments that remind us that we are not alone, God is with us. God's power will get us through.

I might feel alone in my apartment in these long days. Hang in there, and remember Dr. King's words, our mantra: *because I have been to the mountaintop... I've seen the Promised Land.*

You might feel ensnared in a toxic relationship. There is a greater power than human control, you are not alone; *because I have been to the mountaintop... I've seen the Promised Land.*

These days I'm tired of hearing infection and fatality statistics; these days can be fearful. But, there is a bigger view of things. From a mountaintop perspective, we are “held” through holy history, God, Yahweh our guide. Remember God guiding a nation out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness. They suffered, they complained. God's children would then make many mistakes, they would succumb to the temptation of evil human systems of death and control. Christian history shows how frequently we forgot the essential teachings of Jesus to serve and love.

But throughout history, Holy Love was alongside them. Us. Holy Love is right here today. Every so often we might need mountaintop moments to remind us that God's ways defy human reason and laws. When we are tired, or facing uncertainty ahead, or struggling to be heard, or feeling the weight of injustice, remember the mountaintop message that God's Love is greater than any evil or oppressive system.

How is that for a Valentine message! Amen.