

February 11th: Transform

Good morning again, my friends. This morning we continue our study of the Gospel of Mark, and we once again return to these stories of Jesus. As we read and reflect together, I invite you into this rich narrative, which has a compelling action embedded inside of it. And because our yearly theme is “Love in Action,” I also invite you to prayerfully consider how this text might be calling you into loving action in your own life this week.

Let’s begin our time of reflection by praying together.

Transformative God, there is so much in our lives that we wish we could change. We sometimes wish we could change ourselves, or change the circumstances we find ourselves in, only to learn that any kind of change is difficult and disruptive work. But still we long to be transformed. We long for a better, brighter future that is different from our present reality. We long for a world that is more whole, more loving, more just, and more safe. Begin a new work in us today so that we might be shifted little by little into the people, disciples, and leaders that you have created us to be. Transform our communities and lead us into new ways of being and living, we pray. Amen.

When I first moved to the Pacific Northwest almost six years ago, I resolved that I was going to take up hiking. All my friends were doing it, it seemed like a good time. I’m a long distance walker, I reasoned to myself, how hard could hiking possibly be? I had done a little hiking when I was kid during my summers in New Hampshire, and I thought those skills would definitely translate to this new environment. What I failed to realize was that those two thousand foot tall hills in New England don’t really compare to the full blown mountains that my friends intended to drag me to.

In those first six months that I lived in Seattle, I tagged along on a few of the smaller, less scary hikes that my extremely athletic friends picked out...and I hate to admit it, but I crashed and burned. Every single hike we went on, it rained. Every single trail was steeper than I anticipated. I didn’t have the right hiking boots, and I developed blisters the size of a quarter because the

appropriate hiking socks didn't fit into my sneakers. My rain jacket that was perfectly fine for city dwelling and short walks from my apartment to my car was woefully inadequate for hours outside in the constant drizzle. I underestimated how much energy it would take to climb a mountain, so the fruit snacks that I packed didn't quite cut it. Every time on the ride home, I was wet, sticky, and hangry.

All my friends told me the views from the top were worth all of that pain, discomfort, and constant need to wipe water droplets from my glasses. And that was occasionally true—we did see some lovely vistas, and I did come to appreciate the unique beauty of the North Cascades, but there were multiple occasions where we climbed for hours only to reach a summit completely shrouded in clouds. We would reach the top, only to find our view blocked by fog, and I would be disappointed.

Eventually I decided that long city walks were more my speed, but I've never really given up hope that one day I'll have the mountaintop moment that all the hiking enthusiasts rave about. A little piece of me still wishes to reach the peak and have the experience that I know is possible. Maybe you can relate.

But what does this have to do with our text for today? Good question.

Well, one of my Bible professors in seminary once remarked that you know something important is about to happen in scripture if the characters in the story begin to climb a mountain. Whether it's in the Old Testament or the New Testament, getting ready to climb a mountain is almost like this implicit signal that things are about to get real for our spiritual ancestors. It's a trope that we see from the very beginning of our biblical story, like all of God's people throughout the centuries have had this same compulsion to ascend out of our normal environments and reach some meaningful peak. You can pretty much set your clock by it, it happens so frequently

Think about it—think about some of our most famous Bible stories. In the book of Genesis, the patriarch Abraham climbs Mount Moriah with the goal of obeying God's call to sacrifice his son Isaac, only to find that at the summit, God has placed a ram for him to sacrifice instead. In the story of the Exodus,

the great leader Moses climbs Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the rules that will guide the Israelites into a new form of community. During the ministry of the prophet Elijah, he challenges the priests of the pagan god on top of Mount Carmel, and when those priests fail to ignite their sacrifice, Elijah demonstrates the full power of God, who engulfs the altar in flames. In all of these stories, the humans that encounter God are in some way transformed by the experience.

In our wisdom texts, we often find that the poets and songwriters of God's people also talk about these mountain top moments and mountain top feelings—they describe the liminal space where the gap between God and creation is thinner than normal. In Psalm 24, a hymn written by King David of Israel, we hear this question: "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god." And our friend, the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 40 of his writings, gives these instructions to God's people: "You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

When we get to the New Testament, we see that Jesus also spends a lot of time on mountains in his three years of ministry—not just because he does a lot of traveling throughout the land of Israel, but because he knows that the summit is where God's people have a history of connecting with God. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus preaches one of his most famous sermons on top of a mountain, a speech we now know as "the Sermon on the Mount." In Mark chapter 6, we hear that after the miracle of walking on water, Jesus makes a choice to rest away from his disciples—and verse 46 tells us, "After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."

Mountains seem to be at the heart of our common story—not just as the settings of these stories, but as a sign that God and humanity are once again coming together in a powerful and in a transformational way.

So then it's no mystery why the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who share a common source, all include this particular episode that we now call "the Transfiguration of Jesus." This is clearly a pivotal moment for Jesus and his disciples, and our biblical authors want us to understand that this is a mountain top moment that should not be dismissed or forgotten.

Let's break it down a little bit.

Verse two begins this way: "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone." Our gospel writer continues with this amazing revelation: "There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." This would be shocking enough on its own, but in verse 11, we hear, "Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus."

What does this mean—what has happened here?

Well, our gospel authors seem to agree that on this particular mountain peak, the disciples are gifted with this intimate experience of God's presence. Not only does Jesus undergo a divine transfiguration where his clothes are illuminated, there is a voice from above that directly speaks to the disciples. And that heavenly voice confirms what the disciples have been learning about Jesus: this is God's Son, the Messiah, the Savior of God's people. If they had any questions before this about who Jesus was, all those questions have been answered by this encounter. And in addition to this confirmation of Jesus' identity, the disciples receive a specific instruction: they are commanded to listen to Jesus.

In this particular situation on this particular mountain, it is Jesus who is transformed, but Peter, James, and John also have some work to do. They were brought up the mountain for a purpose, and now they have a task of their own to complete. This mountain top moment has demonstrated that they also have

an identity to live into, a voice to speak with, and a transformation to undergo. Their climb down the mountain is just the first step into the future that God is calling them into. The rest of our New Testament tells us the story of how these followers eventually transform into leaders, they transform from students to teachers, they transform from listeners into preachers, they transform from observers into miracle workers. In our gospels and letters, we read that these apostles are the foundation of our church—they are the ones who carry the message, they are the ones who invite others into divine encounters.

But what does this have to do with us?

Well, I'd like to argue that today is a mountain top moment for Bremerton UMC. Today is a day when we've reached a new summit in our life as a church.

These milestones that we've reached—sixty years here at Marine Drive, and one hundred and twenty five years of ministry total—are no small feat. Not every church makes it this long or this far. Not every congregation has deep enough roots to last for over a century in the same community. Not every ministry is able to serve for six decades. We have the opportunity to honor the perseverance, endurance, commitment, and trust that it has taken for us to get to this point. We have this time together to reflect on the incredible faithfulness that God has shown us—and to remember the faithfulness of generations who have gone before us.

Many of you know that it hasn't always been easy, just like climbing a mountain is rarely easy. Our path has taken twists and turns, and there have been challenges, there's no doubt about that. It has taken a lot of strength and courage to keep climbing, even when we can't see the summit or can't visualize what our view will look like. When we started our process of revitalization and revisioning a couple of years ago, we encountered some resistance and confusion, but we have made incredible progress in such a short amount of time because you have dedicated time, and resources, and energy to finding our way forward. We are doing it, my friends. We really are.

And I have to tell you, as someone who doesn't make it to the top of actual mountains very often—I can see what all of the fuss is about. It is truly a joy to be standing on this peak with you all, it is the most amazing experience to see how God has been with us every step of the way. Although more trails, more work, and maybe even more blisters might be in front of us, it is worth celebrating that we have made it this far and we are not turning back now. I'll say that again: we are not turning back now.

And while we are here at this special moment, I think we should be paying attention to what God might be teaching us. As we look all around, and see the beautiful view in front of us, we might want to ask ourselves: what is being revealed to us? On this particular mountain on this particular day, how are we encountering God? What brilliant and dazzling sight are we taking away from this experience? What identity and purpose is being shared with us for the sake of our own transformation?

Because like our spiritual ancestors the disciples, our personal and communal transformation is the next step in this journey together with Jesus. If you have made a decision to follow Jesus, and you desire to embody his divine presence in our world, there is work to be done, and we are the disciples to do it.

It is now our task to transform from dreamers into doers. It is our responsibility to transform from listeners into leaders. It is now our purpose to transform the vision we received from God into tangible, positive, healthy change in our community. It is now our role to take our ministry to the next level and seek out the people that are most in need of hope.

We have been given one hundred and twenty five years of life, and we have been given sixty years at this location, so it is now our job to transform our building into a place where connection and healing happen every day of the week. It is now our privilege to transform this beloved spiritual home into a sanctuary for all of God's children. It is now our assignment to transform our congregation into the multigenerational, multicultural, inclusive family that God is calling us to be. It is now our sacred work to keep climbing, keep

reaching out, keep serving, and keep loving our Bremerton and Kitsap County neighbors.

I know we can do it. I have faith that we can make it to the next mountain. I trust that we can reach a new summit. Not because of our own power, but because of God's power. Not because of our own strength, but because of God's strength. Not because of anything that we've done, but because God has transformed each and every one of us.

And here's the really good news my friends: transformed people transform the world.

Amen.