

## STRANGER THINGS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP



### *Scripture:*

### **Psalm 30**

<sup>1</sup>I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. <sup>2</sup>O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. <sup>3</sup>O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

<sup>4</sup>Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. <sup>5</sup>For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

<sup>6</sup>As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." <sup>7</sup>By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

<sup>8</sup>To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication: <sup>9</sup>"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?" <sup>10</sup>Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!"

<sup>11</sup>You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

<sup>12</sup>so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

### **Mark 9:2-9**

<sup>2</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

<sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

<sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

### **This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



This is one of the stranger stories in the Bible about Jesus. But that makes it seem even the more authentic, too. Don't you agree? If everything in the Bible was written in a perfectly predictable way, I don't think we would believe it, because life is not perfect and rarely

predictable. Strange things happen sometimes when we least suspect them. And this event (for Peter, James and John) was probably one of the stranger things they had ever experienced!

I am a fan of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. My oldest son suggested I watch it because it is a mystery science fiction about a parallel universe or alternate dimension. Some people in the quantum mechanics field of science believe there is a parallel universe that operates right next to ours. In *Stranger Things*, the parallel universe is not a happy one. It is called the Upside Down. When the show's actors go to the Upside Down dimension everything is darker and foggy, and unpredictable with a huge menacing shadow causing destruction.

The main story line usually involves the mysterious experiments that are being conducted at the Hawkins Laboratory and the disappearance of people who have come upon a creature who crossed over from the Upside Down parallel universe. The main characters are a group of folks from the small town Hawkins, Indiana who are willing to risk their lives to save their friends.

The episodes revolve around four middle school youth, and one mysterious girl who has super-kinetic powers. She has escaped the Hawkins Laboratory and teamed up with the kids who are looking for their friend, Will, who disappeared into the Upside Down.

### **UPSIDE DOWN**

You might be wondering how this story connects to our transfiguration story today. Well, I've been feeling like our world has been Upside Down this past year. The unpredictable firestorms gave us a taste of hell, like a visit to the Upside Down universe. We were shaken to the core by the extent of damage we suffered. Our whole country's core values are being shaken up. We were once a friendly nation to immigrants, now we spend billions on building a wall. Our healthcare system is a low priority and building up our nuclear program is a high priority. This is Upside Down of what Jesus was all about. "Love your neighbor as yourself" has become: Buy a gun and be scared of your neighbor because he just might be a terrorist or undocumented.

In *Stranger Things*, when they find their friend Will, he is transfigured in the opposite way Jesus was transfigured. He has become a victim of the Shadow Monster who possesses him and makes him mean. But deep inside his soul, he is still Will. And when his mother and friends find a

way to tap into his soul to remind him of who he is deep down inside, they are able to save him.

**The lesson is that deep inside us,  
we all have a soul that contains our  
authentic compassionate selves.  
No matter how much the world  
oppresses or corrupts our outer selves,  
there is still our inner-self where  
God's love remains strong.  
We are called by God to remember to  
tap into that love and use it to combat  
the opposing negative forces.**

### **JESUS ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP**

When Jesus goes up on the mountain top as described in our scripture for today, he role models for us ways to get back in touch with our souls. He went out into nature and invited trusted supportive friends to join him while he re-centered himself. As he prayed, he was re-assured and inspired by those great mentors who had come before him. I think of it as a re-boot camp to prepare and empower Jesus to complete his ministry.

Peter, James, and John were honored to join Jesus on the mountain. They were blessed to witness him in conversation with prominent figures from their faith history. They saw Jesus' appearance change in a way that could not be duplicated on earth. And they heard the very voice of God declaring Jesus' identity as the beloved of God. I bet they questioned their sanity. What do you bet?

### **A MOUNTAIN TOP IN TURKEY**

I was on a mountain top in Turkey just three years ago around this time of year. It was the mountain where the archeologists found what they believe was the home and burial plot of the Mother Mary. The mountain was called Mount Nightingale.

The mountain was named after Florence Nightingale who led a team of thirty-eight nurses to Turkey during the Crimean War. She established four hospitals in and around Istanbul where they improved the care of wounded soldiers.

Did you know Mary, the mother of Jesus, has an important role in Islamic culture? There are many verses in the Quran relating to Mary which are frequently inscribed on various mosques, including the famous Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul. Turkey reveres Mother Mary, so her burial place is well preserved.

### **THE MOUNTAIN TOP DESCRIBED IN MARK**

Now back to our mountaintop described in the Mark passage for today. Peter finds himself one of the chosen who accompanies Jesus for his transfiguration journey. The glorification makes Jesus appear pure white which was symbolic of a purification ceremony preparing him for his final days of ministry. It must have been a mysterious and spectacular sight!

The closest I've been to a mountain top lately was when I walked my dogs up to the top of the hill in Sonoma Regional Park last Sunday afternoon and looked out over the Valley of the Moon. It was good for my soul. It felt transformative! I could still see the burned areas but they were outshined by the glow of the new green grass. The beautiful greenery that has grown over the ashes gave me much hope for our land to be restored and the beauty of nature resurrected.

### **THE TRANSFORMING PRESENCE OF JESUS**

The transformative light of Christ is restorative for each of us when we take time to focus on the hope Jesus has for us. On that mountaintop Jesus became hopeful even in the midst of cruel oppression from the Roman government and temple leaders. He received reassurance from God through the presence of Elijah and Moses who strengthened him to persevere and complete his mission.

**Have you ever needed reassurance about your ability to persevere? Perhaps you have seen the transforming presence of Jesus in the eyes of your friends who comforted you in your times of need. Maybe you have felt the glory of God shining brightly on you through the colors of the sunset or in the twinkly stars at night.**

Or maybe you felt God calming you through the supportive words from a friend when you were afraid of what might happen in the future.

### **A LIGHT OF HOPE**

I felt a light of hope tug at my soul when I saw the North and South Korean women hockey players sharing the torch lighting ceremony at the opening of the Olympics Friday. Maybe there is a chance for peace between the two countries when they admit they need each other and can cooperate.

In small ways, whenever and wherever the past meets the present and sends us into the future with hope, that is the transforming power of God. Those moments in time carry the light of Jesus with them.

The strange mountaintop experience wasn't just reserved for Jesus and the disciples. It contained a greater message meant for us to apply to our lives today. The mountain top faith experience waiting for each one of us is not in some far off place like Turkey that we must trek thousands of miles to see. It is right here in your own soul and here in this sacred place where you can deepen your faith and learn more about hope in Jesus, the Bible and the power of prayer. By being involved in our Lenten programs starting with Ash Wednesday this week, for example, your faith may be transformed if you seek ways to get closer to God through soup and study, worship and prayer.

The Lenten season is a perfect time to explore the stranger things in the Bible and seek out a mountain top faith for yourself that can sustain you through the uncertainties in life.

### **I BELIEVE; HELP MY UNBELIEF**

Right after this passage, Mark 9 describes how Christ came down the mountain transfigured and purified. Then, can you guess what he did next? He healed the boy who had seizures and could not speak. Jesus went back to being his authentic self, a healer. And in this healing, Jesus tells the father of the boy, "All things can be done for those who believe." And the father replies, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Don't we all have a degree of unbelief underneath our belief? That is part of being a thinking feeling human. Doubt often

accompanies faith, refining it and making it clear. But God loves us even when we doubt that love.

Ponder this: How would you live your life differently if you truly believed that you were totally unconditionally loved? How would you be transfigured if you truly trusted that all that awaits you after death was love? God's love is here for you now and love is waiting for you in the end of your time on this earth. Everyday should be a love-filled day, not just on Valentine's Day.

### **DESTRUCTIVE FORCES**

Something like the Upside Down universe may seem to cross over and bombard us with destructive forces periodically. Sometimes it's in the form of fire, sometimes in the form of cancer, mental illness or divorce.

But the love of Jesus is stronger than the Upside Down. Remembering where our faith came from and who we are deep in our souls, helps us combat the oppressive forces in the world.

In the last episode of *Stranger Things*, the mother is played by a native of Petaluma, Winona Ryder. She sacrifices herself to save her son Will from the grip of the Upside Down Shadow Monster. Spoiler alert: The power of a mother's love for her child wins the battle.

### **TAKE TIME TO RE-CENTER**

In commemoration of Transfiguration Sunday, I want to encourage us all to re-center (in prayer, on hills and mountains, in nature, with friends). Take some time to tap into your soul. This will help you remember that you were created from love and for love and to love you will return.

So let's celebrate Valentine's Day in a big way this week and show love to everyone we meet! Let's make America LOVE again. Amen

### **Benediction:**

#### **Will You Be My Valentine?**

**By Joyce Rupp**

**"Jesus speaks to me:**

**Will you be my valentine?**

**Will you be my friend?**

**Will you let me give you my unconditional love?**

**Will you accept my peace for your tired and worn self?**

**Will you receive my mercy and forgiveness?**

**Will you believe in my love when everyone else has gone away or given up on you?**

**Will you be generous enough to take my love to others when they need you?**

**Will you be bread to my hungry, love to my needy, hope to my desolate?**

**Will you love yourself well and believe in the gifts I've given you?**

**Will you trust me to always walk beside you?**

**Will you lay down your life for me?**

**Will you be my valentine?**

**Will you be my friend?**

**And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen**



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