

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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I have lived near the Great Lakes for over twenty years now. And while I have become somewhat naturalized to this kind of landscape, I still miss the mountains where I grew up. I miss hiking with friends after school. Picking blueberries at high altitudes in late summer. Skiing through the clouds in cold so deep that you can't feel your fingers. I miss spending hours above the tree line looking down at the towns and villages near my home and receiving a near-miraculous sense of perspective. I like the great lakes, but I love the mountains.

Both the Old and New Testaments speak of mountains this morning – Moses on top of Sinai receiving the ten commandments, and, later, Jesus on top of a mountain being blindingly transfigured while a curious Peter, James, and John look on in fear and awe. Intuitively, we know that there is something special about a mountain. But what is it? It might be that it seems to act as a bridge between heaven and earth. Something about the way that it looms above us seems like an invitation to access the divine. Indeed, many mystical traditions, including our own, use the metaphor of a mountain as a way to gain spiritual knowledge, if only the sojourner is willing to take those first, ascending, steps.

But, not all mountains are naturally occurring. There is another kind of mountain that our ancestors flirted with. A more sinister mountain. Think of the story of the tower of Babel, built with all the hubris that humans could muster, thinking of raising ourselves up to heaven so that we could supplant God. Or think of the pyramids, in all their self-congratulatory majesty. Pharaoh, saying to his slaves, make more bricks, make more bricks – forcing them to work for his own glory. These are the bible's artificial mountains—testaments to ego, to denial of death, to enslavement, and to corrupted power.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that the pharaoh in the story of the enslavement of the Hebrew people has no name. And he suggests that is because this pharaoh is an archetype, a stand-in for every tyrant who came before the Hebrew enslavement and every tyrant who could come afterward.

Anyone who has spent 15 seconds looking at the news this week will know that would be pharaohs walking the earth. In 2016, the last war in the Western Hemisphere ended in Columbia. For five years, I took such comfort knowing that when the sun shined on this half of the earth, there was not one place of war. And that, of course, this week has ended. A nation far from here has been invaded by a larger nation. People who have been Christians for a thousand years are

killing other people who have been Christians for a thousand years. Death is in the cities and in the countryside. Lives and homes have been ruined. As I speak, bullets rain and bombs explode for no reason other than one modern pharaoh's delusion of an empire. The powers that be in Russia seek to build their pyramids and towers in the fertile soil of a free and sovereign Ukraine, and the only thing that will come of it is suffering. Weep for our siblings in that country. And pray with every ounce of your strength that God will make a way for peace when that seems impossible.

Building our own mountains to challenge heaven is not new and is not reserved for only the Russian military. On macro and micro levels all over our country, we have been guilty of making foolish lunges at God. Billionaires go to space while kids starve. In our society, we have decided that it is better to have entire channels devoted to cooking food and remodeling houses as entertainment rather than, oh I don't know, providing actual food and actual housing to every person in the richest country in the history of the world. We are not an innocent people and have used colonialism like a weapon that has made the whole world our backyard.

And, still, at this moment, I think it is right that our attention goes to those who are in imminent danger as we sit here on a beautiful morning, along the shore of Lake Michigan.

As scripture and history have had to remind us in every generation, we will not find God at the top of a tower. But if we are lucky, and if we follow in the paths of Jesus, Peter, James, and John, we just might find God at the top of the mountain. And the light from the true God may make us squint a bit—just like the Israelites at the foot of Sinai. But, hopefully, the squinting will give us the perspective we need to see peaceful solutions to the problems that plague us. Hopefully, we will see the folly of princes who go to war. And hopefully, we will encounter God at the top of the mountain, right at the cusp of heaven. At the top of the pyramid is greed and its cousin war. At the top of God's holy mountain is the brightness of God and everlasting peace. May we encounter the peace that passes all understanding and be its messengers now and always. Pray for every act of violence in this world, and especially this morning, pray for Ukraine. Amen.

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 815)