

## **Intro to Dr. King's Speech: I Have Been to the Mountaintop**

TEXT: Luke 9:28-36

*Shared by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 19, 2023*

God willing, I will be with you for many more Transfiguration Sundays to come. You will hear my detailed take on this passage another time. But this week, every time I went to write about Jesus going up on a mountain to pray with his disciples right after telling them about his own coming suffering and death, I kept hearing a well-known, stirring voice saying, "I have been to the mountaintop."

The mountaintop that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. references in that speech wasn't the mountain of transfiguration. It was Mt. Nebo, the mountain Moses ascended for his first and only view of the promised land. God told Moses there that he could see it, but would not enter it. Moses died shortly thereafter and did not enter the promised land.

Jesus, likewise, is on a mountain, knowing that his disciples are soon going to have to carry on without him, and all three gospels tell us that in that time of prayer on the mountain, they were granted a vision of Jesus in spiritual form, glowing with divine favor, right along with Moses and the prophet Elijah. Jesus was compared to both during his ministry.

The mountaintop speech of Dr. King was his last. It was given in Memphis on April 3, 1968; the night before his assassination. On the mountain of transfiguration, we are told that Peter, James, and John were given a glimpse of a side of Jesus they had never seen before. The Greek word in Luke simply says it was "another" Jesus.

Dr. King's final speech shows us another Dr. King. It's not a sermon, per se, although he makes plenty of Bible references. But it references the work that has to be done once the mountaintop ecstasy is over. Peter wants to build dwellings on the mountain to stay and enjoy the glory. Nope. The work, with all its trials, suffering, and even death wait below. And it's the willingness to go through those things that purifies the soul to be transfigured in glory.

I wish we had the ability to show video in here—someday—but I am going to play the audio of Dr. King's last speech. He is speaking to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, preparing them for an upcoming march. So you'll hear references to that—including specific brands and companies of the day that he advised them to boycott.

The speech represents "another" Dr. King. The one that made people mad; the one who threatened systems of white power; the one that got results on both a local and national level; the one pounding the pavement right up until the day an assassin's bullet took his life. He begins his remarks talking about how Ralph Abernathy is his best friend in the world. The following day, Ralph Abernathy would be cradling Dr. King's bloody head in his hands.

The speech is long—we'll likely go beyond 11 am this morning. But I invite you, in this Black History Month, on this day when we're told at least Peter, James, and John got a glimpse of who Jesus really was; to listen and learn who the icon of the civil rights movement really was. Because everything he worked and died for is under threat; including his insistence that working for change must be non-violent. He spoke to striking sanitation workers then. Let him speak to us now. Let us hear the other Dr. King.