

Humans often use the phrase “moving mountains” to describe an incredibly difficult task. If you’ve ever driven along I-40 into the western part of our state, and into eastern Tennessee, and through the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies, this is an apt metaphor. It literally took dynamite, and countless hours of human labor to remove mountains and build passable roads and railways.

Our psalmist chooses to reflect on the immovability of mountains in today’s text. And again, we can relate. Cold and icy winds blow from the west each winter, but the ancient mountains dig in their heels, and protect the piedmont from harsher weather. Hundreds of millions of years of friction and wind have eroded our mountains, and yet even the smaller mountains stand thousands of feet higher than the largest skyscrapers humanity can construct. And while in the last hundred years we have certainly stripped too many precious resources from our mountains in the name of development and progress, these towering mounds remain just as awe striking to us today as they did to the inhabitants of our lands thousands of years ago.

Whether we’re traversing the French Broad River in Maggie Valley, or the Colorado River near the Grand Canyon, or even the Kidron River in Israel, which cuts through the valley of its same name, we find the similarity of immovable mountains, standing like sentinels, offering natural and lasting fortresses. The psalmist alludes to the Kidron Valley, a space just beyond the old city of Jerusalem, and a point where you can stand between the raised hill of the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives. If you’ve ever been there, these peaks are so high, and they tower over you in such a way as to make you wonder if anything could be so permanent.

This morning, the psalmist compares God's presence to immovable mountains. God surrounds us, hovers over us, just like Great Grandfather looking out over Avery and Watauga counties. And even better, the psalmist posits that those who trust in the immovable God have a permanence like Zion. A good God fused with a good people.

I'm trying to cling to this image of immovable mountains in a season when so many of the institutions and traditions we love dearly, the ones that have been immovable mountains in our lives, seem so vulnerable.

Our schools have been safe havens, little sanctuaries where our children can be equipped to grow wings and feel secure. This month, we deliver our children to their centers of learning, equipped with masks and hand sanitizer to ward off an immovable virus. And just this past week, there was tragic news out of the high school I graduated from in Winston-Salem, Mt. Tabor, where gun violence took the life of a student, and will no doubt destroy the life of another, leaving countless families to pick up the pieces. The feeling of assured safety between the first bell and last bell, one that used to seem so permanent and immovable, has been pierced.

Faith communities have seen similar vulnerabilities. We juggle our need and desire to practice and express our faith with our need and desire to remain safe and efficient. The consistency of physical presence, "our doors are always open," has been challenged by pandemic. And survey after survey reveals that fewer and fewer people identify faith communities as valuable and purposeful outlets for the expression of the divine. That is to say, the pipeline or well of disciples is no longer a stocked pond.

But it's not limited to schools and faith houses. The pandemic has strained the consistency of nearly every aspect of life: scheduling a medical procedure, ordering a spare part, repairing an appliance, volunteering services, sharing meals, visiting neighbors, maintaining relationships with friends and family, getting to work, getting online, even determining what we're going to watch on television be it sitcom, gameshow, or sporting event.

Inconsistency is our new consistency.

Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not advocating for a 100% return to the status quo of pre-pandemic life as the solution for regaining our security. So many of our valued institutions and traditions were failing us well before Covid-19, especially for marginalized communities. The pandemic has simply laid bare such deficiencies, and the inability of our once-sacred institutions and traditions to meet the moment. The pandemic has not only increased the wealth gap, but it's also increased the grief gap. For many of us in this room, the pandemic has brought the trauma of inconvenience, and the all-too-closeness of what-ifs. That's not an insignificant burden to bear, but it's a certainly a privileged one. For so many more of our neighbors, the pandemic has brought the trauma and tragedy of death, illness, economic catastrophe, displacement, and the most tangible effects of systemic wickedness.

We've stopped making God's presence, and our faithfulness and fidelity to our neighbors the immovable mountains in our lives. We're surprised to see that the schoolhouse, and the church house, and the storehouse have become fragile and fleeting as we ask them to do our neighboring for us. Our teachers and administrators can figure out how to equip and protect our children by themselves, right? That's what our

taxes are for. There are enough congregants to do the heavy lifting, right? Give the free-market time to work, and it'll sort out the difficult details, right?

This is hard, y'all. We're stuck in this sense of waiting, and apathy, and helplessness, and uncertainty, and grief over the stubbornness of a world that isn't reflecting the immovability of God's presence. And it's a hard week to imagine an unshakable mountain. But maybe, just maybe, this pandemic will offer us a chance to re-evaluate our priorities, to choose to live in those valleys whose mountains have real rather than perceived staying power.

When our systems are less stressed, I think it's easier to notice God's immovability and our communal goodness. When our systems are overloaded and begin to crumble, we find it harder to resonate with sturdy mountain imagery.

I think the Uwharries are a more helpful example of mountain imagery for us today. The oldest mountains in the world, not too far east of here, have been worn down to nubs over millions and millions of years. They once stood as high as the Rockies, but if you view them today, you'll have to imagine the peaks that could've poked through the clouds. And yet, I am not sure that immovable means unchangeable.

You can stand on the base of these mountains that have existed beyond time; who have witnessed and withstood every adaption in the Earth's development. Their scars, and their brokenness reveal a solidarity and empathy with creation. And while they may not be as grand, or as tall, or as famous as other ranges, there is beautiful, complex, fulfilling life. These mountains breed majestic trees, and guard crisp, clear, blue

waters, and echo stories of a thousand generations. God is here, in this place, and life, good life, is in this place.

It's interesting, too, how such life is revealed. To the uninformed witness, the Uwharries might seem like nothing more than a bumpy set of hills. But historical markers and signs tell the story of their presence. And rangers tend their needs – sometimes their controlled fires give new life to the forest; sometimes their gentle reminders to hikers not to feed the critters preserve wildlife; sometimes they offer storytelling about the indigenous people who first made use of the slate stone and heard their songs echo through the valleys and canyons.

I agree with the Psalmist; God is immovable, and God's people faithing and seeking God's presence are immovable, too. But this immovability is not some high peak that shields us from exposure to the elements. This immovability is the desire, much like the ancient Uwharrie mountains, to be present with us in the midst of our exposure, to bear the human experience with us. And through it all, to stand the test of time.

Friends, as we look to the hills, and faith in God's immovability, and the goodness that accompanies it, I think our task is to be stewards of our immovable mountains. The systems and traditions that support our communities cannot be viewed as mere repellents preventing exposure. Our systems and traditions must be mountains we tend; they must be weathered and exposed, just like us, molded and shaped into a rugged, but authentic beauty.

The permanence of Zion isn't physical, nor is it systemic. It's spiritual. Yes, the pilgrims once gathered in a massive stone building, and many of them still flock to its ruins. But what they've come to realize is that

their love and commitment to one another, rooted in God's spirit, is just as sturdy and strong, actually stronger, than temple walls and towering mountains.

The psalmist says our desire to welcome God's presence, to live in goodness with one another, to express empathy and compassion for one another, breeds righteousness. I think that means we have to give of ourselves – stand sturdy like the mountains against the elements. The pandemics of Covid, and gun violence, and poverty, and even apathy, are going to weather us and wear us down. Our love for another, and our desire to stay connected must mimic the resolve and sturdiness of mountains. And as we reimagine and rebuild the systems and traditions that can serve as our new manifestations of immovable mountains, we must ensure that they are rooted in God's spirit, love, and joy.

Friends, may God give us the strength to notice God's immovable presence, and in that presence create immovable mountains of love that can help bring peace to a wear and uncertain world. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.