

The Mountain

Dee Wade

This article first appeared in the August 2007 issue of Presbyterian Voice, published by the Synod of Living Waters (www.synodoflivingwaters.org), and is reprinted here with permission.

The Appalachian mountain wakes up to another morning, orange light painting its eastern slope and tannin scent dusting the air, as it has for each autumn day for more years than mountains can count. But this morning differs, rustles, recoils, if it only could, back into the nightfall previous.

The man is on the mountain today, his face fixed with a decision painfully, wrenchingly made, as go competing pulls on the heart. So he, the man, dares not look directly at the mountain because he knows the mountain and the mountain knows him.

He will go after the last untouched coal seam the mountain protects, and yes, in the way easiest for him and hardest on the mountain. The top is coming off, which, both man and mountain recognize, simplifies strip mining to its most honest form, bringing the mercy of the executioner's swift and sharpened blade. Its peak—a curling, timbered ridge line more than a rocky steeple—will be sent screaming into the hollers and valleys below, a peak that used to stretch higher than the Rockies and epochs older than they, with vistas grander, before it began the long slow settle downward that this man is going to accelerate.

Either there is something about a mountain we humans fear, or the sad proclivity of our species holds: what we treasure we destroy.

The man manifests the treasuring side, and admirably, representing the fifth generation that has claimed this mountain as home since the time of the Cherokee. Parts of his family have inhabited any number of the hollowed out nesting places that ring the mountain at different levels, each a place of succor and refuge, of fertility and growth, of family weal and woe. On this mountain they farmed the narrow fields, hunted the game, logged the timber, dug out the coal, gathered its ginseng, protected its honor, and adored its Creator with music and prayer. They have tested and loved this mountain, and the mountain, as only a mountain might, has tested and loved them. The man's parents were the last to live on the mountain, and he's been tending it ever since, living as he does now in the county seat, in a nice brick home he built mostly by himself, a home like people have in cities lying west and north.

The man is a good citizen and churchman, quiet with his faith but upheld by it, the first college graduate of his family who, in turn, has raised a home-returned doctor, a Lexington school teacher and a Knoxville architect. He supports local arts and education and NPR and PBS like nobody's business, sits on more community boards than is healthy and makes sure that every preacher in town—protestant, catholic, pentecostal—knows that he will deliver a thanksgiving turkey to any family without one. The man brags on

nothing concerning himself except his children and grandchildren. He lives the biblical admonition, *to whom much is given, much is required.*

But in the space of a few months, he will take down what it took God millions of earth years to build up, using incalculable forces: continents colliding, tectonic plates shifting, gigatons of pressure and resulting heat, compressing ancient forest lowlands under layers of rock and then thrusting them and their overburden thousands of feet into the air. The man and his kind can no more rebuild or reclaim this mountain, repairing the gash in its spirit, than they can scoop out the oceans or suspend stars in space.

The man knows all that, intuitively and rationally; thus his profound sorrow. He will benefit from the mountain's harrowing no more than the people in cities faraway and nearby who desire to flip a switch for lighting, and to cool indoor air each summer, to power golf carts and jig saws and laptops, church sound systems and MRI machines and pop corn poppers. Liberal, conservative, tree hugger and Bambi hunter, Nascar mom and Lacrosse dad, Bible thumping Neanderthal and New Age Airhead: all who demand cheap energy are complicit in this tragedy, and there is no one more righteous than another, no, not one.

It's just too bad that the mountain, who is so much older and wiser and more patient than the moving-around parts of creation, has to foot the unpaid utility bill for every one else. It's no mystery, then, that the man can only look at the mountain askance as he walks along its skin on this crisp fall day.

It's too bad, too, that no one thinks to ask the mountain about the human urge to burn all fossil fuel in the earth in a handful of generations. How can this man, who lives, at best, 100 years, get to determine the mountain's fate when the mountain has lived for millennia? As good a man as he is, who died and made him God?

On another mountain, not that long ago in true mountain time, another man, a man named Moses, received a mission statement from God. The first section involved humanity's relationship with God. No God but God, no idols, no empty name calling concerning God, no work on the sabbath, because if God can leave creation at peace every now and then, so can we, it said.

The second, longer section, involved human to human relations, or, maybe we can say, creature to creature ones. It began with a call to honor father and mother, so that days may be good and long on earth. An even hundred years' worth? It's a very practical mission we are tendered, for as one generation cares for another, the generations live longer, proved by the opposite: people ignored, neglected, abused fare briefly and not so well.

If mountains wonder at all, could this mountain wonder: "Who's your mama, people, if not Mother Earth? Who's your daddy if not Father Time? Who but a mountain like me has both; lots of earth within and lots of time logged? Why would you want to decapitate your parents? Where's the honor in that? Doesn't such dishonor shorten your own life?"

The mountain makes a very good point. Perhaps we should listen. Is it not to the hills that we look, from whence cometh our help? Indeed, from the Lord our help cometh, the One who made heaven and earth.

The Reverend Dee Wade is pastor of Anchorage Presbyterian Church in Anchorage, Kentucky.