

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Journeys to the Mountaintop

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For the past 50 or so years, the character of Moses – you know, the one who brought us the Ten Commandments – has been etched in the American mind with the face of Charlton Heston. In the movie, Moses went up on the mountain, encountered the burning bush and the revelations of God, and came down the mountain full of fury and rage, breaking the tablets when he discovered his flock was worshipping the God of gold.

Journeys up and down mountains have held revelations for saints, heroes, poets, mystics, politicians, prophets, and ordinary folks alike. Mountains have been symbols for as long as we can remember, because their presence seems eternal and changeless.

So what would Moses say if we decided to rip the top off Mount Sinai, blast away its innards to get to an eighteen-inch seam of coal, level it until it looks like a barren plain, build a precarious lake of coal slurry and sludge, and dump the rest of the mountain into the surrounding valleys and poison the waters below? What would Moses say? Do you think God might thunder once again with anger and judgment?

All over eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, southwest Virginia, and northeast Tennessee, coal companies are rushing to level the mountains. So far, over 500 destroyed forever. Maybe it's our human challenge to what is eternal and changeless. For sure, it seems to be greed and indifference to the people who live there.

But put down that firearm for a minute, Charlton, because this story has a human side beyond the Hollywood drama. I recently had a chance to view the movie *Coal Country* and join other panelists in discussing the film before an eager university audience. It's not a Hollywood product, but rather a real-life drama that documents the struggle in one small Appalachian community when the coal companies arrive with fistfuls of dollars and promises of jobs. And in

communities where cash and jobs are always scarce, people listen and are tempted.

By chance, I also got to recently meet one of the main characters of *Coal Country*, Kathy Selvage. Kathy's father was an underground coal miner and a member of the UMWA for decades. When mountaintop removal began near her home in Wise, VA, Kathy saw not only the overwhelming destruction of land and water, but the way it was tearing her community apart. It pitted old friends against each other. As her friend Lorelei Scarbrough says, "We don't live where they mine coal. They mine coal where we live."

Politicians are busy in Washington, DC trying to strip the Environmental Protection Agency of its authority to enforce the Clean Water Act, a 40-year old bi-partisan law signed by President Richard Nixon that — if enforced — would stop mountaintop removal. It came from the time when politicians made policy for human beings and communities rather than corporations. Maybe politicians of this era need to go up on the mountain for a new revelation of what is right — that is, unless the mountain has been forever removed. For more information, go to www.ilovemountains.org or www.appvoices.org.

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