

ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 9:28-36

March 3, 2019

Today, our journey during worship has us ascending a mountain. In the Bible, mountains are special places, because often they are places where God shows up in powerful and surprising ways. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James and John are a few of the well-known biblical characters who had mountain encounters with God. Typically, such encounters are short-lived, but significant. They are opportunities to glimpse something of the contrast between what life looks like in this world and what life is meant to look like when standing in the fullness of God's presence.

Today, before we begin our ascent with Jesus, let's pause to consider what had just occurred on ground level when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" There were several responses but then Peter blurted out, "You are the Messiah of God." (Luke 9:18-20) Perhaps others had been thinking it, but having it spoken out loud for the first time was huge. But then Jesus spoils that inspired and exciting declaration by saying "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected... and killed..." (Lk 9:22) And if this wasn't shocking enough, Jesus follows it up with, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Lk 9:23) What in the world had they gotten themselves into when they left everything to follow Jesus? This sure didn't sound like the secure and glorious future they had been imagining.

It's right after these bombshell declarations that Jesus ascends the mountain with Peter, James and John. This getting away to be in prayerful communion and conversation with God was not at all unusual for Jesus. But this time ended up being surprisingly different, because while on that mountain Jesus began to radiate light, and suddenly the two great figures of Judaism, Moses and Elijah, appeared with him. It was a dazzling event, but then as suddenly as it all began, Moses who represents the law and Elijah who represents the prophets, disappeared. Jesus, the pinnacle of God's salvation, is left standing alone, and the stunned disciples hear a voice saying, "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him." (Luke 9:35) In other words, if you doubt who Jesus is, don't – believe what he says and do what he asks!

In his awestruck state, Peter's initial reaction is to preserve that glorious moment by building three structures or shrines, one for each of the three shining figures. In those days, when something special happened, building a shrine was the way to mark the spot and commemorate the special event. It was the only way Peter knew how to preserve the experience. And yet such moments are not so much meant to be preserved, but to be experienced and taken to heart. The moment was brief, but in that moment the disciples were given a glimpse of the glory that lay just below the surface of Jesus.

From the glow of that mountain experience, Jesus and his disciples descended back into the valley where there were places to go, sick people to be healed, teachings to be shared, disputes among the disciples to be confronted, and crosses to bear. As Jesus had promised, there was suffering and death ahead. Those disciples went back down into the valley, with nothing more to sustain them than a glimpse of God's glory, and the assurance that everything that was about to unfold was stamped with God's approval.

This is simply the way it is. God does not regularly confront us with startling light and thunder. More often, God quietly pulls back the curtain between today and eternity for only a peek. And when such a glimpse is given to us, whether it is on a mountain in Judea, at church camp as a youth, beside the bed of a dying loved one, or in a church pew on a Sunday morning, we cherish such glimpses as fleeting, blessed gifts of revelation. Because this coming face to face with God is a powerful and basically inexplicable experience that could be why the disciples said nothing after returning to the valley. But even though such experiences of God's glory cannot be fully grasped and described, those throughout the ages who have worshipped the Living God know them to be real. Whenever we gather to worship as a community of faith, we proclaim our belief that God is present and we anticipate an encounter.

Perhaps like Peter, you have wanted to hold onto an experience of glory when you have wished that the choir would go on singing, when the words of a hymn or a praise song make you aware of another reality, when prayer seems to transport you into the presence of God, or when your participation in Holy Communion draws you into a future reality of full communion with God. I would even like to think that there have been those times when you just hated for the sermon to end, because you knew God was speaking directly to you. But such moments when your spirit is lifted and your heart is strangely warmed do not last forever in this life. Even though our mountain moments are important to our overall experience and understanding of God, they are not the reality of our everyday lives. It is important to remember that it is none other than Jesus who leads us down the mountain and who continues to walk with us as we face the difficult realities of valley life.

But thankfully, those profound "wow" moments of encounter often leave us with a deep sense of assurance and peace, a deep sense of what is truly important and a clearer sense of our mission in the world. And that's good, because on Monday morning as the disciples got back to the business at hand in the valley, and as we do the same thing, it's easy to wonder what good is an encounter with the living God? After all, such glorious experiences do not eliminate all our doubts and concerns, our struggles and disagreements. Life in the valley is hard, and we don't have all the answers. We cannot build our whole faith on such unexpected, sporadic experiences any more than we can build the whole story of Jesus around what happened in those few transfiguring moments on a mountain. And yet, it makes a difference to have seen, even for a moment, and to have heard the reassuring, confirming and yet challenging voice of God.

I have had my own experiences on the mountain with Jesus, and I assume you have as well. It changes us to stand, even for a moment in God's glorious presence, and to know in those moments a different, more powerful reality than the one we live in day after day. To remember those revelations is important, because when it is all over and done with, when the benediction is given and we go forth, it sometimes seems as though nothing has changed in our world. And yet, I hope that many of you here this morning can testify to the fact that encountering God does make all the difference for you.

You may come to this sanctuary week after week to escape the problems and pain of the real world, or to seek the help you need to confront and live with those problems. Here in this place, you are given an opportunity to withdraw to the mountain before once again returning to the valley. You are given an opportunity to connect with and be encouraged by others who will also be returning to the valley. But as we return to that unchanged valley, we experience it differently after our encounter with God.

Without precious times of renewal, withdrawal and vision – without times of worship and personal encounter, we would not be able to faithfully endure life at the bottom of the mountain. We would not be able to walk with our Lord the way of the cross. It's true we might prefer a God who encourages us to separate ourselves from the troubles down below, but we know better. Jesus could not stay on the mountain if he was to continue his journey as Savior of the world, and his disciples also cannot avoid the valley where disagreement, anger, betrayal, desertion and death prospered. As Jesus' story included both the mountain and the cross, so our own stories do as well.

I believe the Lord comes to us in this place and will continue coming to us to motivate, encourage, strengthen and challenge us. Perhaps some of you who are here today seeking refuge from your life in the valley are wondering whether an encounter with God is even possible in this place. It could be that nothing will seem visibly different after you leave here today, but I still hope and pray that you leave with an assurance of God's presence, and with a strength of spirit that helps you face whatever is ahead.

Let us be grateful for a God who not only invites us to join him on the mountain, but who also walks with us through the valleys of everyday life with all of its harsh realities and bitter disappointments. Come to this time of Holy Communion knowing the Lord, Jesus is the one inviting you. He is here to encourage and strengthen each one of us for a life of faith in the valley. Because we practice open communion, all who seek to love and serve the Lord are invited to eat and drink. Let us prepare ourselves...