

February 26, 2017
Mountain Top Moments
Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Gracia y paz de dios del Padre, Hijo, y Espiritu Santo.
Grace to you and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Family vacations when I was a child almost always included camping, tent camping. One of those camping trips was a week at Diamond Lake in south-central Oregon. Diamond Lake is flanked by two beautiful mountains. On the East is rugged Mt. Thielsen, to the west is gentle, dome-shaped Mt. Bailey.

My dad thought it would be a great idea for the whole family, except mom, to climb Mt. Bailey. It is a 5 mile, gentle climb to the 2,000-foot summit. 11 year-old me didn't find it such a gentle climb, especially wearing my older brother's high-top converse tennis shoes. As we cleared the tree line, we saw ahead of us the last several hundred yards of the ascent. That final stretch traverses a rocky lava field falling off from both sides of a narrow, single-file path. We dared not take our eyes off the narrow path for fear of slipping on the loose rocks and tumbling hundreds of feet down the slope. It was impossible to enjoy the view while navigating that narrow path.

Our elation at reaching the summit changed to bewilderment. There at the summit was a boulder sitting atop an overturned wooden crate wrapped in plastic. There were smaller boulders around the crate to anchor it against the wind and rain and snow. Curious, we set aside the boulders and righted the crate. Under the crate lay a plastic wrapped book. A Holy Bible. Someone had built a shrine on this mountain-top.

The Epiphany season begins with the voice of God Speaking from the clouds over the river Jordan proclaiming Jesus to be God's beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased.

Today, the season of Epiphany concludes with an even more dramatic presentation of God's glory, not from the waters of the Jordan River, but from a mountaintop. Images of Moses on Mt. Sinai linger in the disciples' minds. Moses and his select entourage followed God's instructions to go to the mountain where they would receive God's covenant. As Moses entered the Divine presence of God, "the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and the cloud covered the mountain for six days". God wrapped Moses in that protective cloud for forty days and forty nights. Days and nights in which the glory of God was revealed to Moses. Imagine THAT mountain-top experience. But, Moses, alone experienced it.

Unlike Moses, Jesus took his closest disciples with him up mountain to catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

Jesus and the disciples had been traveling throughout Galilee teaching, preaching and healing. The crowds following Jesus were growing larger and larger. The political and religious leaders were becoming increasingly alarmed at these large gatherings. The occupying Roman Empire was putting pressure on the religious leaders to do something about these crowds. Large crowds pose a threat to the political authorities. We have seen that in our own time.

Recognizing that the increasing size of the crowds was increasing the anxiety of the leaders, Jesus warns his disciples of the darkness that is to come in Jerusalem; that he will undergo great suffering at the hands of the religious leaders. Jesus tells them that he will be killed and on the third day be raised.

Well, Peter – in typical Peter fashion – won't hear of it, saying "This must never happen to you". Jesus sternly rebukes Peter, calling him Satan and a stumbling block.

He warns all of the disciples, saying “if any of you want to be my disciples, you have to deny yourself, take up your cross and then follow me”. OK disciples! You’ve been warned. Warned that Jesus is going to be punished by the earthly powers and glorified before God. Six days later here we are with Peter, James and John following Jesus up the mountain.

Reading this story takes my breath away. Clouds, bright white clouds, and Jesus’ face shining like the sun! his clothes dazzling white!

My dad was fascinated by clouds. He would stare at them, watching them shift across the sky, changing shape, size and even color. He knew the difference between cumulus and nimbus, stratus and cirrus. He and I would describe to each other the images we saw in the clouds.

It is impossible to describe what the disciples saw in the cloud that day. It was so amazing, that Peter wanted to build a shrine, like the shrine we found atop Mt Bailey.

It is natural to want to hold onto those mountain-top experiences. We remember the church of our youth and wish for that experience to return. We recall the joy-filled worship we experienced in another place and wish that we could replicate it here. We struggle to live on the plain where life is mundane and suffering is all around us. It is more exciting to be on the mountain-top listening in on the conversation among Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

Our adrenaline is pumping and our eyes are wide as we witness the glory of God. After we paged through the Bible we found on top of Mt Bailey we rewrapped it, set the crate and the boulders back in place and started back down the mountain. Dad let me lead the way for a while. I must have been distracted by something, or just inexperienced, because I got us lost, well, not LOST-lost, but certainly confused. We had passed the same spot several times when one of my brothers stopped and announced that we were going in circles. It was then that dad took over and led us the rest of the way down the mountain.

When we lose our way on the mountain our inclination is to long for the glory of the peak where all was bright and lovely. Like the early Christians to whom Peter wrote we often chase after cleverly devised myths that would take us back to the glory days as we wait for Jesus to return.

Listen to Jesus tell us what it means to follow him. To follow Jesus is to take up the cross. The cross of suffering. The cross of oppression by empire against the vulnerable. The cross of persecution by the privileged against the ‘other’.

Mountain-top experiences are awesome! Wouldn’t it be amazing to stay in the bright cloud? In the presence of Jesus, hearing the voice of God? We must come down from the mountain and get to work. Just as Peter and James and John had to come down from the mountain because Jesus ministry on earth was not done. There was something much greater to come. The mission is not complete. The story of God’s glory is still not complete.

We know that Jesus has lived and died and that he rose again. We trust that Jesus is present, here, today, at this table where we touch and taste the real body and blood of our Lord. God is still speaking. There is still work to do. There are mountains to climb, valleys to pass through and crosses to carry.

This Wednesday we enter the season of Lent. The season of walking in the valley, unsure of the path and sometimes afraid. The season in which we carry the cross of discipleship as we see the needs of our neighbor and respond. The season in which we follow Jesus to the mountain called Golgatha, where we stand in amazement and confusion even while we say, Thanks be to God!