



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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(Transfiguration of the Lord)

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Climb Every Mountain

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Mountain climbing is growing in popularity. An estimated 4-6 million Americans participate in this adventurous sport in some way or another. Some pursue it in a manner that involves intensive training, including physical and technical training in ropes, safety, and other techniques. Others just enjoy ascending mountains using well worn trails. Some pursue it as a solitary activity, practiced alone or with one or two other individuals. For others it is a social occasion. The goal is to get to the top, and if not to the top, at least to a higher geographical plane.

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is a mountain climbing adventure. The lectionary links it with the Old Testament story of Moses, ascending the mountain to receive the tablets of the Law. In both accounts a mountain is the context for a pivotal event in God's relationship with God's people. The story of Moses receiving the commandments is the foundation story of the covenant that gave definition to the people's relationship with God and each other. The story of the Transfiguration is the dramatic turning point in the gospel. This event confirmed Jesus as the son of God: "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him!" It also affirmed his calling as a suffering servant: "The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and suffer".

This morning, I want to examine the transfiguration in terms of the human desire to climb mountains. First: why do we climb mountains? Second: what do we discover when we get to the top? Third: Christ invites us to climb a mountain with him.

I

Why do we climb mountains? Why do we spend time, money and effort to get to the top of geographical structures?

- There are more civilized choices!
- You can't live up there.
- You can't drive up there.
- There is no cell phone reception there.
- You won't find a Starbucks there.

Maybe that is why we climb mountains. The soul desires solitude. We need to be away from the beeps, buzzes, voices and other noise that is part of daily life. We need interior time: time inside ourselves: time with our souls. We desire a Sabbath: a rest or respite from the usual. We need to be alone with God. We need the nurture of silence.

But there is another reason why we climb mountains. The view is awesome! Climbing a mountain gives us a panoramic view. We are able to see the larger picture. Things that loomed so large when we were next to them, now appear as minuscule specks, if we can see them at all. We climb mountains, because we desire a better view. We need these panoramic views of life and reality. We need to see the broader picture. That is why generals would send their scouts to the mountains. They needed a larger view of the battlefield terrain. We need a larger view because life has a way of ensnaring us in gummy details and sticky webs. Perceiving and understanding the bigger picture affords us a moment of transcendence from the tyranny of the tiny and unimportant.

II

What do we discover when we get to the top? If we knew what we were going to see when we climbed mountains, it would not be a compelling pursuit. We have an idea of what we are going to see. We have an idea of what we are going to experience, but climbing to the top of a mountain always holds an element of surprise, a moment of sudden insight, an experience we did not expect. Did Moses know? Did James, John, and Peter know? They had an idea that something important awaited, but what?

What do we discover when we get to the top? It may be a moment of self-discovery. "I did it!" The program *Outward Bound*, is an outdoors experience intended for adolescents who are troubled or having a difficult time in life. They are challenged with tasks related to mountaineering that push them physically, but more importantly the tasks challenge them to discover themselves, their gifts, and also their shortcomings.

What do we discover when we get to the top? It may be an experience that cannot be replicated. The transfiguration was such an experience. Peter thought that he could build a monument to capture the experience forever, but there are some experiences that can only reside in our memory.

I remember climbing a mountain with Karen in New Mexico. We took an intermediate trail and there were times when I was a bit frightened, wondering if we bit off more than we could chew. We eventually got to the top, exhausted. I remember sitting there, catching my breath and looking around. I was moved by the intensity of the silence. I could hear myself breath, and then I heard this strange pumping sound in the air.... It was an eagle flying overhead.... I could hear the air move as it flapped its wings. An amazing moment! But it was not a "Kodak moment". No picture could ever fully capture that experience, and yet it is burned into my very

being. We climb mountains because we are not exactly sure what awaits us at the top, but we know it could be awesome and life changing.

III

Jesus invites us to climb a mountain with the other disciples, Peter, James, and John. It is curious that Luke never tells us the name of the mountain they ascended. I am sure that there was a mountain, but I also believe that Luke had an additional intent. This was also a figurative mountain, a mountain that exists in the human spirit, a challenging mountain that holds a promise for each of us who summon the moral courage to ascend it. Luke was challenging his readers to climb with Christ.

On Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent. Traditionally this is a time of introspection: a time to look at ourselves, who we are and what we need to change in our lives. It is a time for recommitment to discipline, (which is the same word as disciple). It is a time for journeying with Christ.

One of the songs that we sing during this season is “Jesus Walked that Lonesome Valley.” It is a great spiritual that profoundly addresses the journey of the soul. But before we walk that valley, Christ invites us to the mountaintop. He invites to climb the mountain with Peter, James and John and to see what they saw, experience what they experienced. He invites us into a more intimate relationship with God. Moses experienced this. Elijah experienced this. Jesus invited his disciples to experience this. Jesus invites us.

- He invites us to experience the presence of God as we enter the cloud that brings clarity.
- He invites us to experience life in its larger context, a panoramic mountain top view of reality.
- He invites us to experience the exhilaration and the exhaustion of the mountain of spirit.
- He invites us to understand the Christ we follow; to understand and to share his suffering as he turns his head and journeys to Jerusalem and the cross.
- He invites us to join his disciples and climb the mountain.
- He invites us to experience the perspective of a mountain vision...
- He invites us to discover that there are mountains to climb in our lives.
- He invites us to broaden our vision and to cast our blinders to the wind.

Jesus walked the valleys of life... but those valleys exist only because there are mountains. Christ also invites his disciples, (you and me), to climb the mountain with him and experience with him, the awesome presence of God. This is the Good News. Amen.