

Sermon for Sunday, March 2, 2014 Last Sunday After the Epiphany Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9 "Message On The Mountain"

All this talk of mountains! It makes me nervous. I'm afraid of heights, so the thought of climbing a mountain gives me the heeby-jeebies. I've gone up mountains occasionally – under duress – whether it was skiing in my younger days, or watching my kids snowboard, or hiking with my husband who is NOT afraid of heights, but mostly, I avoid mountains.

Here's the odd thing, though. On occasion when I have gone up mountains, when I've stopped and caught my breath, the view is beautiful. Even though I am nervous, I appreciate what I'm seeing...as long as I don't feel like I'm going to fall.

It's sad – I fear that I miss out on some gorgeous views of God's beautiful creation because I only anticipate the anxiety and don't think about the view.

I suspect there are other ways that I avoid mountaintop experiences. Maybe not actual physical mountains, but big challenges that frighten me a bit. Things that will take me out of my comfort zone. Choices that are uncommon, nonstandard, dizzy-making. And I expect you've had those experiences as well.

And in avoiding those mountaintop experiences, we have lost opportunities for magnificent moments. All because we were afraid to take a risk.

Here's the thing: it is alright to be afraid. It is alright to acknowledge that we are scared, that bad things might happen. But it is also worth it to take the risk and go up the mountain, because you may have the opportunity for joy. And it is an opportunity that will not be available to you at sea level, in your safe and ordinary world. You have to take the risk to be available for the transformative experience, even though you're afraid. But it's worth the risk.

When Moses went up the mountain at God's instruction, I suspect he was at least a little bit afraid. He headed up there and the top of the mountain was covered in clouds – you couldn't see a thing. For someone like me, who is terrified of making a misstep and falling, that would have been a deal-breaker right there. And once he got up in the clouds, "the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain." Scary. And Moses hung out there for 40 days and 40 nights. And then he came back down from that experience with the tablets on which were inscribed the ten commandments. Would God have made sure that God's people knew what was expected of them if Moses hadn't gone up the mountain? Probably...God always wants to make sure we know what is expected of us. But Moses brought back down not only the law, but the power of the Lord. His face shone with the light of God. He was transformed by the experience, and it informed his leadership of the sometimes stiff-necked people of Israel.

When Peter, James and John went up the mountain with Jesus, they had no idea what would happen there. They were fishermen. The likelihood that they had ever climbed a mountain before was very, very slim. I expect that they would have been uncomfortable at the prospect. But the Lord told them to come with him, so they went. And when they got up there, something very strange and unexpected happened. They didn't look around at the great view from the top of the mountain, because there was something much more remarkable to view right in front of them. Jesus, shining like a beacon, transformed, transfigured, and with him

Moses and Elijah, both of whom were presumably perfectly comfortable with mountaintops after their own experiences. It was a remarkable sight, and at first they had no idea what to do with what they were seeing.

Think of it: imagine your boss says, we're doing a team-building exercise, so you and I are going to climb a mountain. You go because it's the boss, and you don't want to look like a wuss in front of your colleagues, even though you are nervous about the climb because you're out of shape. And you get to the top and suddenly it's not only you all standing there, but Steve Jobs and Thomas Edison are standing there, too. How do you react? Do you think that someone snuck some magic mushroom juice into your water bottle? The disciples probably felt that way, too.

Peter, always the leader but not always the smartest of leaders, says, "Wow, boss, this is really cool. Let me pitch some tents for each of you." He's trying, bless him. He wants to offer hospitality because his mother raised him to be a generous host, and when you're under stress, you revert to the behavior that is ingrained because you've been hearing about it for twenty or thirty years or more. But it's really not necessary – they don't need tents. At the next moment, they hear the voice of God, like James Earl Jones on steroids, saying "Jesus is my boy, and I'm proud of him. Pay attention to him!" No surprise that the disciples fall down on the ground. They are shocked, frightened, clueless as to how to respond to this moment...

...much as we are clueless when we have one of those mountaintop moments, one of those transformative experiences, and it is hard for us to remember exactly what happened once we get down to earth. All we know is that we have been witness to something we never expected, and we are transformed.

That's second part of the challenge of climbing the mountain: not only do we not know what we will find when we get there, we have a hard time hanging on to it when we get back down to earth.

C.S. Lewis writes gives us an insight on this problem in his final book in the Narnia series, *The Silver Chair*. Aslan, the lion says "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters."

Transformative experiences, mountaintop moments, usually have something that you can hang onto. Maybe it's two stone tablets. Maybe it's the quality of the light that shone around Jesus, or the magnificent boom of God's voice. Maybe it's the way your heart leapt when you saw the view from the mountain, or when you first looked into the eyes of your newborn child, or when you first heard an orchestra play "The Great Gates of Kiev" from Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." Take those signs, those memories that you can hang onto, so that when you come down off the mountain there is something to remind you, to link you to how it felt when you were forever changed. You may not remember all of it, but you will remember some of it, because you have been changed, and you need to keep going back to

that well of memory to feel how you are different. And if it is an opportunity to be in the presence of God, you want to keep remembering.

But what about us? Unlike Moses, unlike Peter and James and John, we rarely get the opportunity to go up a mountain with the Lord, though, right?

But what if the three rounds of chemo is your mountain? What if rebuilding your life and risking looking for love again after a bitter divorce is your mountain? What if time in prison is your mountain? What if the fear that you are losing the ability to take care of yourself as you age is your mountain? What if trying for a new job is your mountain?

We don't go up mountains expecting to see God shining bright as the sun. We go up the mountains hoping we can make it to the top, hoping that the view won't be clouded over, hoping that we brought enough snacks to fuel us. But we get up there, and more often than not, something other than that which we expected awaits us there. God is there, welcoming us, embracing us, saying "you made it this far, you'll complete the hike," encouraging us and reminding us that we are recipients of his grace.

Climb the mountains that are risky. Climb the mountains that feel like a forced march that you didn't sign up for. Climb the mountains that scare you. Climb the mountains that you never thought yourself capable of. Climb the mountains, and enjoy the view...the view of God, who has been walking with you the whole way.

Amen.