

Sermon  
8.13.23  
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Year A, Proper 14

Rite 2: Collect of the Day (Contemporary)

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right,

Good morning, St. Dunstan's.

Who here enjoys a trip to higher elevations? Most people I know, let me correct that most Texans I know, enjoy a trip to the mountains especially in these dog days of summer!

Picture yourself for a moment, breathing in the pine aroma, feeling the crisp air, with nothing but a brilliant blue sky overhead. Do you remember those things called jackets that are in the back recesses of your closet? It is here you probably need one.

And that's where I want to begin this message in the mountains.

In seminary, I was taught that it's best to preach using only one of the scripture readings. But I am going a little rogue because all the readings are fabulous. So, I'm going to limit it to two. Our Old Testament reading and our Gospel reading both mention mountains.

This morning we're going to talk about Elijah and about Jesus, and their experience on a mountain.

Did you know the United States of America has over 70,000 **named** mountains? I find that incredible. I'm sure you know the highest peak is in Alaska. Mount Denali towers at over 20,000 feet.

Israel has over 1000 named mountains. The Bible mentions mountains over 500 times. The religious symbolism behind mountains is that it is a way of getting closer to God. Elijah was one of Israel's greatest prophets. If you recall last week, Elijah met with Jesus and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Let me set the stage for where we find our prophet:

Elijah takes on corrupt King Ahab and his terrorist wife Jezebel. Elijah faces off against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. There the prophet is outnumbered 850 to 1, but God is with him and so Elijah is triumphant, and the prophets of Baal end up dead.

And yet after an incredible victory, and awesome display of God's power, the Hebrew scripture tells the story of our man Elijah, who is scared, sinking down into a depression and running for his life.

Instead of focusing on what God just did, Elijah loses his focus. He makes his way to Mt. Horeb. Mount Horeb is an alternative name for Mount Sinai. The majority of scholarship considers them to be the same mountain due to the and interchangeable in the way of terms throughout the Hebrew Scripture. This is an intentional meeting place. You see, Horeb is the place where God first made a covenant with Israel by giving the 10 Commandments to Moses.

With God meeting Elijah on Mount Horeb, God is reminding Elijah of a total projectory of relationship with God's beloved people. Elijah is there on top of Mt. Horeb and where is reminded of an entire history of God's protection, presence, love, and relationship.

So, what happens?

God's question after Elijah arrives at the mountain: "What are you doing here?" God asks, and Elijah pours out his woes: "I've done your work but now everyone's turned against you and I'm the only one left who still worships you."

What our dear prophet fails to see is the community of the believers. He forgot about Obadiah, who took a **hundred prophets of God** and hid them in a cave and fed them with bread and water.

In v.18, we read how God said there were **seven thousand in Israel**, whose knees that have not bowed down to Baal. How often do we feel all alone when we have an entire community waiting to help out? Here at St. Dunstan's, we have incredible resources. We have the pastoral care team; we have the Stephen ministry; volunteers who are willing to come along beside us and pray with us.

Asking for help is quite humbling. It takes effort on our part.

Being Texans, we have this ‘can do’ mentality or a ‘Pull yourself up from the boot straps’ type of thought.

But what happens when your bootstraps are broken?

Have you ever tried to pull on a cowboy boot without the tabs? You wobble your foot back and forth, straining to make the thing fit properly. It takes a great amount of effort. There are times when it does not work. You can’t get that boot to fit. However, if you had a helper, someone to place one hand on the toe of the boot and the other on the heel, give it a little push... wa-la...there you go. We all need help.

What happens next to Elijah? Well, God does something unusual.

God sends a powerful wind that starts to tear the mountain apart. Here in Houston, you understand wind. Do the names Carla, Ike, Allison, Harvey, have any meaning to you? What about Alicia? Alicia blew into Houston in August of 1983. She came right up I-45 straight to the plains of Oklahoma. It will be 40 years ago next weekend. How do I know? Because Hurricane Alicia ruined my outdoor wedding. But... we still got married. You see that hurricane force wind wasn’t God.

Next, God sends an earthquake that shakes the very ground under Elijah’s feet. Anyone been in an earthquake, seeing your belongings jumble off the wall, hear groaning from all of creation? That can be a terrifying experience. But the earthquake wasn’t God.

Then God sends fire, like Elijah witnessed previously on Mount Carmel. Like those precious people just experienced over in Maui. But the fire wasn’t God.

And then...

Everything comes to an extreme halt. The entire mountain is hushed. Some translations call it “a still, small voice”.

Some call it “a gentle whisper”. The New Revised Standard Version says it was “the sound of sheer silence”.

The image that comes to my mind is the Ultimate Source of Comfort, like a favorite quilt, surrounding Elijah, at his all-time lowest point in life. It’s a tender moment in the aftermath of all the displays of power and violence Elijah had witnessed and been part of over on Mt. Carmel. It’s a much needed, rejuvenating occasion for Elijah to experience God’s peace. There on the mountain top.

Now, I'm going to switch to our Gospel reading for today.

A mountain in Scripture represents an elevated place above the level of this world.

In the book of Matthew, we find the Lord Jesus up on seven different mountains.

The beginning of the Gospel reading for this week says Jesus "made" the disciples get into the boat (14:22). A better translation of this main verb would be "to force" or "to compel." Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He compelled them to get into the boat and to leave him alone while He dismissed the crowds after miraculously feeding them. I have no doubt it was challenging to Jesus to send his friends away because he loved spending time with his dear friends, his posse, his tribe. Sending them away meant Jesus had to manage all of this swath of humanity all by himself. Now, that was some sort of crowd control. There were 5,000 men. Which means there was probably twice as many as that counting all the women and children who were probably there with the men (14:21). The crowd followed Jesus out to this lonely place (14:13). Remember that it was the disciples who wanted Jesus to get rid of the crowds before the great miracle of the feeding (14:15). Only **after** the physical feeding, the spiritual blessing, the emotional ministering to this tremendous gathering of angst ridden souls does Jesus send everyone away. Never forget about the extreme political climate, oppression and marginalization and more than likely dealing with mental anxiety that these people were experiencing. So, why did he send away everyone? All 5000 plus *and* his dear disciples.

Just like you and me, Jesus needed some alone time with God. Jesus needed to retreat. Fr. Roman is gone on retreat, albeit a working retreat over at Camp Allen. If you can't get to the mountains, then perhaps you can get over to Camp Allen and experience the outdoors.

The mountain in Matthew's Gospel is a place for encountering God. Jesus often found times within his busy schedule to get alone and be with God, to seek God's comfort, to hear God's voice.

Jesus goes from a peaceful retreat, a mountain top experience of being alone with God to a tumultuous sea. From high above the sea of Galilee, Jesus knows there is a boat out there full of his friends and he needs to

join them. Swells are crashing, yet Jesus manages to make it too them. The exhausted disciples see a figure coming toward them, moving across the water. Only one thing floats above the water in their minds, a ghost (phantasma). Now from disciples point of view, they know what they are witnessing is a sheer impossibility. NO ONE can walk on water. Above the noise of the wind and their own screaming, they hear a familiar voice. Who shouts, "It is I," or literally "I AM." Here's the 'double entendre.' Jesus uses a familiar expression which they would recognize immediately because they know Hebrew Scripture. **I Am...** this is the unutterable name of God from Exodus 3:14. Only the Gospel of Matthew provides the detail of Peter walking on the water in his account.

The same for us, we have left a mountain top experience, we get back to real life then the storms start blowing or our case, the temperatures become almost unbearable. We sink, we're melting. And we cry out, we ask for help, then ,we begin to do the work either the interior work or the exterior work that needs to be done.

I want to close with something I found quite interesting.

Most of you, I am sure have heard this quote,

**"The mountains are calling, and I must go..."**

John Muir, born in 1838 and was one of America's most famous and influential preservationists. He is known as the Father of our National Parks.

Muir's intention was to live life as an inventor. In 1866 went to Indianapolis, a railroad and industrial center, then he started working in a major machine shop. Muir increased productivity & impressed owners so much they wanted to make him a partner. While on the job, an accident happened. A file slipped and pierced Muir's

right eye. His sight quickly drained out of the one eye, and the other went into temporary "sympathetic" blindness.

This was a pivotal event in Muir's life who plunged into despair and depression, (much like our prophet Elijah). Muir experienced something of a conversion as his sight slowly returned. He came away from that accident inspired. He had a new sense of purpose.

Recovering in bed with a brochure on Yosemite valley on his lap, he contemplated his accident that nearly robbed him of the ability to investigate the glory of God's creation. When the shop owners came offering him partnership in the firm, he declined. He wrote to a friend, "God has to nearly kill us sometimes, to teach us lessons."

Muir became a prolific writer. On September 3, 1873, 150 years ago, he wrote to his sister,

**"The mountains are calling, and I must go, and I will work on while I can, studying incessantly."**

The full quote truly speaks to his work in those high places. Turns out, Muir wasn't just talking about hiking for the sake of casual enjoyment. Muir, however, was talking about the work he felt compelled to do in those beautiful places. So, while our use of his quote may reflect on recreational time in the mountains, there is still deep inspiration to find in it still.

Remember our collect for today:

Rite 2:

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, **the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we**, who cannot exist without you, **may by You be enabled to live according to your will;**

Just like Elijah, Jesus, and John Muir, I encourage you to seek the Lord on whatever mountain top experience you may have, wherever that may be.

**Seek God, listen for God's gentle voice and do what God has called you to do.**

