

Up and Down the Mountain
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Mark 9.2-9

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I watched the opening ceremonies for the Winter Olympics the other night. It was a wonderful mix --- of tradition and technology, of cultures, and even political intrigue. They pulled out all the stops with the light show and fireworks. What struck me was how, during the parade of nations, so many of the athletes were filming – taking selfies, running video as they walked in, trying to catch a once-in-a-lifetime moment. Someday, when they are showing the pictures to their grandchildren, loading those ancient jpeg pictures on a screen will seem as exotic as the carousel projector slides our grandparents show us now. But the stories they'll tell!

I bet that Peter, James and John wish they'd had a nifty iPhone when they went that day up Mt Tabor with Jesus. Mountains are one of those places through the Bible and through history that stokes our spiritual imagination, that are the sites of significant spiritual events. As Coloradoans we totally get that. Though I am told on good authority that the deserts, the oceans, ice-fields, and prairie badlands all are prime sites as well.

So when Jesus asks them to go up the mountain with him, they are tapping into deep traditions: Abraham almost sacrificing his son on Mt Moriah, Moses receiving the law at Mt Sinai, him later seeing the Promised Land from Mt Nebo. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. Later Jesus prayed on the Mt of Olives, and ascended to heaven from an unnamed mountain in Galilee. To go up a mountain is to intentionally set out, looking in some way for the ultimate, for God.

Any mountain climb takes preparation. The text tells us that this happened "six days later," after the events of the prior chapter. It is hard to know exactly what is being referenced, but most likely it is the story of Peter's confession. You remember how that goes: Jesus asks the disciples "Who do people say that I am?" And they say, Elijah, or John the Baptizer or one of the other prophets. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus presses. "You are the Messiah, the son of God" Peter says. Jesus commends him, "Flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven showed you this!" Of course, Peter doesn't really understand that that means. So when Jesus then starts telling them that he will be betrayed to the rulers, suffer and die, and then rise on the third day, Peter says "No! That's not the right story! You're going to be the King, drive out the Romans, and we'll be the world superpower!" Jesus has heard this siren song before, from the tempter in his own wilderness, so rebukes Peter: "Go away, Satan! You're thinking in human terms, not God's."

I wonder what Peter and the other disciples thought about this over the following week. How might it have set them up to really see what happened on the mountain top?

Oh, the mountain top! Even an ordinary mountain top is exhilarating. You trudge through the forest, and often can't see your goal. That's how it would have been for Jesus and his friends, Mt Tabor is cloaked in thick oak chaparral. On other mountains, maybe you come out above

timberline, and the way is rocky and loose. There may be dangers from cliffs and exposure. And when, huffing and panting, you climb the last boulder --- Wow! I did it! And look! You can see the whole world! And indeed, from the top of Tabor, you can see the from the Sea of Galilee to the north, east to the Jordan River and the mountains beyond, west to Mt Carmel, and spreading out at your feet are the rich agricultural fields of the Jezreel plain. What a view!

And then came the sound and light show. Better than lasers, fireworks and virtual reality, suddenly reality looked completely different. Jesus was transfigured – his everyday look faded to the background, and suddenly the brilliant light of God shone through him. It was like looking at the sun at the moment the eclipse ended, the light that was always there suddenly sparking through. And then appeared Elijah and Moses, two of the towering figures from Israel's story, representing the Prophets and the Law. Now, how the disciples knew who each of them was, I'm not sure – but in these kind of non-rational spiritual experiences, sometimes you *just know* things to the core of your being.

These kind of experiences don't happen to most people very often, maybe only once in a life. But when they do happen, the thing to do is just go with it. Surf the wave, keep listening to the song, bask in the light. There will be time for analysis and pondering and meaning-making later. Give free rein to to whatever. When I was on pilgrimage in Israel last summer, when I was at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, I went into the small shrine built around the slab where Jesus was laid after his death. The monks only let you have maybe 2 minutes there before they moved you out, because there's only room for 3 people, that's how small it is. So I looked around inside the shrine, read the placard, "He is not here, he is risen!" and quickly kissed the slab. And started to cry. I stepped out of the shrine, tears running down my cheeks, and knew that God was doing something with me. As I cried harder, I went around behind a pillar in a corner – and cried and cried and cried. For 20 minutes. Yeah, I was the weird guy crying his eyes out. And I still can't tell you why or wherefore. That I was sad, or joyful, or what. Or even that I felt better when I was done. All I could figure afterwards was that something cracked loose, broke free, came undammed, deep in my soul.

When something like that happens, you can't catch and bottle it. Unlike the athletes taking pictures as they entered the stadium, it would have been absurd to try to take a selfie then, to capture it for later. But that's pretty much what Peter suggests, though the narrator notes that "He didn't know what he was talking about." "Look, Lord, it's good that John, James and I are here, because we can build some quick shelters, for you, Elijah and Moses, where we can just stay." I mean, this is amazing, don't let it stop!

Then it got more intense: a cloud covered the mountaintop, echoing the cloud on Sinai, the dazzling darkness where God is, and a voice: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!" And then, the vision ended. Silence.

You can imagine the quiet disciples as they climbed back down the mountain. Jesus tells them not to tell anyone, "Until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead." They are totally

confused --- confused by Jesus predicting a death they cannot accept and a resurrection they cannot understand. Was this vision something like what Jesus means about his resurrection?

We always have to go back down the mountain. The vision ends. The retreat is over, it's time to go home. It is getting late, a thunderstorm is coming up, better get off the mountain! That happened to me once, when I'd climbed a 14er, Conundrum Peak. I had started up late, and kept going even as the weather moved in. I got to the summit, quickly took a picture and started down. I was barely 100' from the top when the rain and hail opened up, and the lightening started. I sat down on my butt and slid down a rock scree chute, because I didn't want to be higher than anything around me! Descending can be as challenging as climbing. I got drenched, and wasn't dressed for a storm. By the time I got back to Conundrum Hot Springs and camp, I was so hypothermic I could hardly get out of my clothes to get into the hot spring. Used up a couple of my 9 lives that day! But nobody at the camp seemed interested in my adventure.

So I wonder about the other 8 disciples, who hadn't gone along that day, who didn't have the amazing experience. Instead, they had the frustrating experience of trying to heal someone but not being able to! And while Jesus had told the 3 not to say anything, I bet they spilled the beans somewhere along the lines. When you hear God speak, it's tough to stay quiet! So what did the others feel about it? Were they jealous? Did they not believe the story? Did they need to minimize it, that it was no big deal?

One of the great challenges of the Christian life is finding ways to talk about what God has done for us in ways that don't put others off. It is so easy to have a blessed experience, and in our enthusiasm imply, "Because God did this for me, God should do this for you!" Or worse, to get proud and imply, "See how spiritual I am!" Sometimes it is perfectly well meaning, we want others to experience God too, and forget that people's psychology of religion is different. Centering prayer is a rich well of devotion for one person, and a frustrating bore to another. A Bach requiem lifts one person to the gates of heaven, while another is thrilled at Hillsong Worship or Casting Crowns. I remember feeling so insufficient at times in my life because I didn't speak in tongues – forgetting all the other beautiful gifts that God *had* given me.

We do well to train our eyes to see God in the everyday wonders we encounter --- I'm reminded of the story of the monk Brother Lawrence who was the monastery cook, who in his little book "Practicing the Presence of Christ" wrote,

"The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."

But even seeing God in every flower, meeting Christ in every homeless person, learning to hear God in the sound of sheer silence isn't the final test. As wonderful as spiritual experiences are,

as rare as they are, as unique to each person they are, they are not the bottom line of our Christian walk. But:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.