

Mountains and Valleys
Luke 9:28-43
Preached March 9, 2025

Do any of you have a bucket list? You know, those things you would like to do before you ‘kick the bucket’? Surprisingly, Greg has discovered something for his bucket – he had gotten into good enough shape to be able to hike with me. And just a few days ago, at the age of 68, he joked that we would climb Mt Everest. Except it’s no joke. In 2012 Tamae Watanabe became the oldest woman to summit Everest at the age of 73. The oldest man was Min Bahadur Sherchan at the age of 76. In 2007 Phil Michael climbed it with a robotic aortic valve. In 2006 Mark Inglis summited the climb on 2 artificial legs. And in 2001 Erik Weihenmayer summited Everest blind.

These are all amazing achievements, especially considering that the first successful scaling of Everest only occurred on May 29, 1953, when a New Zealand beekeeper named Edmund Hillary and a Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, were the first ever to reach Everest's summit. Fifteen previous attempts to summit that peak were met with defeat, some had even died on its slopes. Now, when success was finally achieved, it occurred at the same time as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. For Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, for England and the Queen, and for the world it was, quite literally, a ‘mountain top experience’.

In scripture today we hear the story of another amazing ascent on a mountain. But this was unique, even by Everest standards. In the middle of a very busy and very successful ministry, Jesus has chosen to take his three closest companions up an unknown mountain. But his passion was not to set a world record, or to attempt some great exploit. Rather, it seems he was taking his disciples on a spiritual retreat. Jesus went with that very intention-to pray, to seek God and to engage God, not just for his busy ministry, but for his passion.

And it was while he was praying God’s majesty not only filled him but was revealed to those who were praying with him. Even though Peter, James and John had come to realize, and claim, Jesus as the Messiah, now they saw his glory. And with him they also saw two other men, known to have met God on a mountain. Moses who received the law and covenant at Sinai, and Elijah the prophet, who found new hope and direction when he encountered God at Horeb.

It must have been a tremendously powerful moment, because Peter wanted to build three shelters there, not to ‘stay put’ but to acknowledge the sacred event, just as his ancestors had built memorials to remember their exodus. And like the story of the exodus, they were encompassed by God’s glory and heard God’s word. They hear the truth Jesus heard at his baptism. God proclaims to them “This is my beloved Son, my Chosen One.” This is the Messiah, God’s Holy One; the center of the covenant, and the source of the promise. And they also hear God’s clear command to them. “Listen to him.”

Listen to him!? Aren’t these Jesus’ disciples? Haven’t they traveled with Jesus for years, heard all his sermons and even had private lessons? What do they need to hear? Well, it seems they missed what Jesus had said to them when Peter declared he was the Christ. And they also seemed to miss Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah, that “they spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” And that doesn’t seem to make much sense. Until you realize that literally, they are talking about Jesus’ exodus. With the glory of God surrounding

them Jesus, Moses and Elijah, were wrestling with the challenge of God's vision for his creation, and his awesome mission for his Son; the crucifixion that was awaiting Jesus in the city of God.

Perhaps that is why Jesus went to this mountain to pray. Perhaps he needed to meet with God yet again, to find direction like Moses on Sinai, and courage like Elijah on Horeb; to reaffirm his baptismal call and feel again the weight of glory. Because from there Jesus comes down into the valley, and makes his way to Jerusalem; and to an exodus that will lead his people, out of slavery to sin, and into the new kingdom of God, just as God had designed so long ago.

And perhaps this is why the disciples were there too. Because they also needed to see the glory of Christ so that they would have the strength to follow him, to stand below the hill of Calvary and trust in God's holy purposes, even when they did not see it clearly. Perhaps they needed those moments so that they could see, not just Christ's glory, but the world's need, and answer the call to "take up your cross and follow me."

Isn't that what all of Jesus' disciples really need? We may not have scaled mountains, or had a sacred encounter, (few of us ever do); but all of us need hope and strength, and a vision to live by. We need to see Jesus' divinity shining through his humanity. And we need to know that God is able to fill our ordinary lives with heavenly purpose, so that his glory can shine through our service. That is what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We need an inspiring vision and a clear call, so that we can accomplish God's purposes for us, in our lives and in our community.

The truth is, Jesus did not stay on the mountain top, nor did the disciples. Jesus led them back into the valley, into a world still encumbered by darkness and suffering. And at the foot of the mountain, in the fading glow of its glory, he brought healing to a troubled youth and peace to a dispirited father. When Jesus invites us to 'follow me', that is what he means for us to do. He wants us to experience his majesty, but he also wants us to serve the world. And we need both to be able to 'take up the cross'.

That call became evident in the life of Edmund Hillary. After his ascent up Mount Everest he became an overnight celebrity, even being knighted by the newly exalted Queen. He could have lived for the rest of his life glowing in the glory, building a little shrine of his success. But he didn't! Instead, he went back to Nepal, back to the Sherpas, and a community in need. There he established the Himalayan trust, and in all it has built 27 schools, two hospitals and 12 medical clinics, multiple clean water systems, plus numerous bridges and airfields. In recent years the trust has expanded its scope, devoting considerable funds to rebuilding monasteries and homes and to reforesting valleys and slopes in the region.

Sir Edmund Hillary had his mountaintop experience. And it moved him to a life of mission. And that is as it ought to be. From mountain to valley. From vision to mission. That is the way of God. And today we are invited to continue that journey, to leave our comfort zone for the challenge of living by faith and hope and love, so that all people can know the goodness and glory of God.

I think it would make a great bucket list. How about you? Amen.

Rev. Rosemary Dawson