

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9: 2-8: Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one<sup>[b]</sup> on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,<sup>[c]</sup> one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;<sup>[d]</sup> listen to him!” <sup>8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

For most of human existence, mountains have been considered sacred. Virtually every culture that developed anywhere near a mountain, believed that being on the mountaintop was a holy and sacred experience – it was a place to have a close encounter with God. The Greeks believed that Mt. Olympus was the home of the gods. The Incas believed that the mountains served as a portal to the gods. In Japan, the holiest Buddhist monasteries are on the top of mountains. The Navajo believed that mountains themselves were holy and sacred. And we could go on and on. Our faith tradition is no exception. God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush on a mountain and later gave the 10 commandments on the same mountain. Elijah heard God’s still small voice in a mountain cave. And time and again in the gospels, we see Jesus journeying to the mountaintop, usually alone, but in our gospel lesson today, he took Peter, James, and John with him.

Most of us can feel a deeper connection to the divine and the transcendent from the top of a mountain.

I certainly can. Y’all know how much I love to hike. But for me, reaching the top of a mountain is not only just a recreational outlet, but it’s a pretty sacred experience. At my lowest points in life, at times when I’ve felt sad for some reason or another, the best thing I can do is climb a mountain. At times when I’ve needed clarity, the best thing I can do is climb a mountain. Some of my most significant friendships and relationships happened on mountains. Mary Page and I fell in love on a hiking trip in the mountains of southwest Virginia and then a year later, I wrote her a letter from a mountain in the Cascade Mountains of Washington asking her to marry me.

Most stories in Scripture give us a fair amount of detail about what happens on the mountaintop, but not much detail on the journey up. But I think part of the reason why the mountaintop often brings a transcendent experience is the journey to get there. Getting to the top of a mountain can be hard. I’ve gotten lost. I’ve sprained my ankles and had to choose to keep going in pain or turn back. My legs have cramped and my body has suffered to get to the top. When I’m climbing a particularly difficult mountain, there almost always comes a point where I think, why do I do this – this is not any fun. And my body rebels against me, screaming at me that it’s not worth it, that I’d be better off to turn back.

But I’ve climbed enough mountains to know to ignore that voice, to know that if I can just keep going, if I can just keep putting one foot in front of the other, it will all be worth it. And guess

what, it always is. No matter how hard the journey is, I have never been sorry that I made it when I reach the top of the mountain. It's always worth it because I always find that I experience something on the mountain that is more than just beauty. It's hard to explain, but reaching the top of the mountain always makes the journey worth it – no matter how hard it may be.

But I think a significant reason the mountain top is so transcendent are the things we learn on the journey. The journey humbles us. Some people who've summited some of the world's greatest peaks may talk about conquering the mountain. But no one conquers mountains. At best, we are able to be on the mountain top as a guest, as an interloper in a holy space for a short period of time. We get a glimpse of the world from high above, but then we must come back down. Secondly, the journey teaches to keep going, to continue placing one foot in front of the other when the easy thing to do is to simply turn around. Finally, the journey tells us that there are things that are worth hurting and suffering for. The pain of the journey is worth it once we reach the summit.

For Peter, James, and John, their mountain top experience marks a significant transition in their journey with Jesus. Prior to this experience, life with Jesus had been pretty good. They had witnessed amazing miracles. Jesus had healed many people; he had taught profound things; and a large crowd was following them. But right before this story, for the first time, Jesus told the disciples that he was going to be killed. This was a stunning statement because things seemed to be going so well and Peter couldn't accept it. The Scripture says that Peter began to "rebuke Jesus," to which Jesus responded by saying to Peter, "Get behind me Satan," in all certainty, one of Peter's lowest moments. The journey, that up unto this point had been so good, all of a sudden took a turn for the worse. And for the first time, the disciples are confronted with the possibility that not only will life not always be good but that Jesus will die. The journey is about to get a lot harder. And that's when Jesus decides to take them up on a mountain.

And as we might expect, something transcendent happens. These three men were able to see Jesus in all of his glory, but not only that, they were also able to see two of the greatest figures from the Jewish religion, Moses and Elijah who appeared and were there talking with Jesus. It was a true mountain-top encounter, a great day for Peter and James and John. They were with Jesus and also with the heroes of their faith.

And so it's not difficult for us to understand Peter's excitement as he says, "Jesus, thanks so much for bringing us. This is so awesome. Let me build a dwelling to honor you and one to honor Moses and one to honor Elijah."

But then God spoke.

Last week, I said it's rare for God to speak in the New Testament. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), God speaks exactly twice. We saw the first time last week in Jesus' baptism, and this is the second time. And both times, God says almost the same thing. At Jesus'

baptism, God says, "You are my son the beloved. With you I am well pleased." And here, on the mountain top, God begins with the same words, "This is my Son, the Beloved." But then finishes by saying, "Listen to him."

It's an important lesson for Peter, James, and John and one that will become even more important as Jesus begins the journey to the cross.

It was easy to listen to Jesus when things were good, when miracles were being performed and crowds flocked to them. But all of that would soon change. It wouldn't be as easy to listen to Jesus now that he is talking about being killed and calling on the disciples to take up their cross too. It wouldn't be as easy to listen to Jesus when the soldiers come for them. And so Peter, James, and John needed this mountaintop moment, they needed this word from God to sustain them as their journey was about to get much harder. And as that journey becomes more and more difficult, the question that Peter, James, and John must answer is "Who will we listen to?"

Will they listen to those who tell them to seek greatness?

Will they listen to the voices of those who are expecting a Messiah to violently overthrow the Romans?

Will they listen to the voice that tells them they would be better off to go back to their old lives as fishermen in Galilee?

Or will they continue to listen to Jesus?

Last week, I said that the life of the baptized, the life of trying to follow Jesus is not always peaceful. Sometimes it asks really hard and difficult things from us. Like a journey to some of the most difficult mountains, the easy thing to do is to turn around, to go back. But then we miss the mountain top. I think one of the reasons we have so many mountain top experiences in Scripture, is to remind us that the journey, no matter how difficult, is worth it.

And in that sense, the mountain becomes the perfect metaphor for us in our journey of faith. Just as climbing a mountain brings with it a host of challenges, just as there are times when we feel like we are better off if we just turned around and went back, the summit is still there, calling to us, promising that if we can just keep putting one foot in front of the other, it will all be worth it. So too is the life of faith. When it's easier to seek revenge rather than offer forgiveness, when it's easier to choose selfishness over sacrifice, when it's easier to choose violence over peace...remember the words that God spoke to Peter, James, and John and by extension to us.

"This is My Son. Listen to Him."

May we listen to him even when it seems to make no sense.

May we listen to him and choose love even if the world around us seems to hate.

May we listen to him and choose peace even if the world around us tells us we need to fight.

May we listen to him and choose generosity even if the world around us tells us we need to keep it all for ourselves.

May we listen to him and trust that sooner or later, his voice will lead us to the mountaintop, and the journey, no matter how hard, will have been worth it all along.

Amen.