

Last Sunday of Epiphany

Church of the Advent

March 3, 2019

Climbing Mountains

Four years ago, Mark and I took a wonderful vacation to the Lake Country of northern England that involved a lot of walking and a lot of climbing on what the British call “fells.” Most serious professional climbers would call them mere hills, but to me they were mountains. Every morning we packed our belongings into a van for their road trip to our next inn, while we took off walking behind our guide, rain or shine, through miles of forest paths and sheep fields and up and up until I didn’t know which would give out first—my legs or my lungs. And I will never again use the phrase, “it’s all downhill from here,” because I can tell you now, it is the coming down that almost kills you when you are sporting old knees and ankles. I would love to say that the views were all spectacular, and sometimes they were, when we were not shrouded in fog. The funny thing is that I don’t remember the views, though I have pictures to remind me of them. I do remember thousands of footfalls up and down the fells and through the sheep fields, watching the ground for safe spots to plant my boots, hoping to come home with all limbs intact.

Today our scripture readings offer us lots of mountain- climbing drama including blinding light, voices from heaven, mysterious veils—holy drama that gives us a rare glimpse of what we all secretly desire—just a peek at God, so we could be assured that the God we know and worship and depend upon is actually real and wants to be in relationship with us.

To put our first story from today’s readings in context, it is one in a series of stories in the Book of Exodus about Moses leaving the Israelites in the desert and going up a mountain to talk to God. One story included the Israelites washing their clothes and waiting at the foot of the mountain for Moses to come down after they had seen thunder, lightning, and smoke and hearing the sound of trumpets from where Moses had gone.

The people said, “all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do,” sharing a sacrifice as an offering of thanksgiving to God. That story ended well.

In another story, Moses received a detailed list of God’s instructions for the how community was to build their tabernacle; unfortunately, this time Moses had been gone up the mountain so long that the people got restless waiting for him and persuaded Aaron to help them make a golden calf to worship in the meantime. God sent Moses back down to express his displeasure, and Moses was none too pleased himself. He broke the first set of tablets with all of those carefully carved rules, and then had that golden calf ground to powder, scattered upon the water, making a gold punch that he made the people drink. You can imagine how God came up with the phrase “stiff necked people,” rethinking the plan to guide them to that land of milk and honey. This whole episode sent Moses into a flurry of negotiations with God for the people.

The last story of Moses going up the mountain left him up there for 40 days and nights with the Lord, fasting from even bread and water, and when Moses came down that mountain for the last time, with the Ten Commandments intact, his face was *shining* so brightly that it required a veil to cover it. Moses had been transformed by his experience, and the people took notice of his serene shining face and were ready to listen to him, to get to work building God a tabernacle for the Ark of the Covenant, designed to carry those tablets and create a focus of worship for the community. From that time on, God sent the people a cloud to surround them when they were to be still, which lifted when they were to move. They designated a special tent as the "tent of meeting" where Moses would go talk to God and at night the light out of that tent shone like fire, just like Moses’ face. God had come down from the mountain to them and was in their midst to stay.

There is mountain climbing drama in our gospel today, too. Jesus climbed up a mountain with Peter, James and John in tow, at a time shortly after the disciples had fed thousands with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. After that long day, the tired disciples had asked Jesus to send the crowd away, so they could all retreat for a while to pray. In a

frank and private conversation about *who* Jesus was and *what* was going to happen to him, Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus told them to take up their cross and follow him, to be prepared to lose their lives for his sake, it must have changed the tone of the adventure for the disciples; who found themselves caught up in something bigger than they could have imagined when they first dropped those fishing nets and followed Jesus. But they kept on following, and climbed up that mountain after him.

What happened next reminds us of Moses' story—dazzling white light, obscuring cloud, visitors from the other side and the voice of God that might have reminded those disciples of the story of Moses meeting God. You would think even Peter would be struck dumb, but no, he pipes up with an offer to build them a place to stay, although there is no mention of available materials or tools. Maybe he is thinking of how Moses had been given instructions to build that old tabernacle.

So what are these dramas about? What part would we play in these transforming stories? Are we Aaron, caught “gold-handed” so to speak, missing the mark with a calf whose luster could not compare to Moses' shining face? Are we “don't just stand there, do something” Peter, unable to take in the fulfillment of God in Jesus, even when we are hearing it from God's own mouth, because we are too busy trying to build God a house to live in? Or are we just part of that crowd at the bottom, washing our clothes and sensing the distance between us and God on the mountain, waiting for someone else to do the climb for us, waiting for news at the trail head?

I believe we all secretly crave a mountaintop experience with God now and again. We need a bit of dazzle, a bit of light to reassure us that we are noticed, that we are cared for, that we are forgiven, that we are transformed. We long for some sign of God's grace as we move through our busy lives, wondering if we are good enough, faithful enough, strong enough to make the climb, as if the top of a mountain were the only place God could be found. What I discovered on our trip to England was that for me, the revelation of God was not guaranteed at the top of the fells. Yes, I saw the face of God in the landscape. I took in the beautiful light on sunny days and the beauty of deep dark

overhanging clouds. I heard the Spirit of God in the wind. But I felt God's presence most profoundly in gifts of others on the way—quick smiles, stories that made me laugh, the kindness of strangers and the gentle encouragement that gave me the determination to keep going, one careful step at a time.

In the end, we do not need to climb a mountain to find God transfigured to realize that God's grace is waiting to shine in our every effort, in our every relationship, in every step we take. All we need to do is to stop looking to the golden calf, to set aside some time to rest and pray, to wait for the fog to lift. Then we will find ourselves already transformed by God's love, with the power even to rebuke demons when necessary, restoring wholeness and healing to so many suffering ones of this world. *For the Lord our God is the Holy One. Amen.*