

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 2/7/16
Season: Epiphany Last • Transfiguration
Luke 9:8-36

One of the many reasons I love living where we do is that we're surrounded by mountains. When I first arrived here, on one particularly bright September day, I ran into someone who said, "Oh look! We're having a four-mountain day." She was right. It was really awesome to see the Cascades to the East, the Olympics to the West, snow-capped Rainier to the South and snow-covered Mt. Baker to the North. Awesome!

Now, awesome is a word I think we overuse sometimes, but when it comes to mountains "awesome" is just right. I grew up in the mountains in West Virginia, so mountains have always been important to me. Hiking in the mountains or skiing in the mountains, I feel so close to the beauty of this world that God has created for us to live in. When I'm in the mountains I feel a little closer to the story God is writing in the world, and the story that God is writing in my own life.

A lot of interesting things happen on mountains in the Bible. When Moses was a young man, he was peacefully herding his sheep one day and led them up a mountain looking for more pasture. All of a sudden, a bush burst into flames and an angel appeared out of the bush. If that wasn't amazing enough, when Moses looked at the bush he saw that it wasn't burning up – even though it was on fire! He couldn't believe his eyes, so he turned away, and then he heard a voice speaking to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses". "Here I am," says Moses. "Don't come near me," the voice says, "Take your shoes off. You're standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob." And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. It was too awesome.

And Elijah met God on the same mountain Moses did, although it was a few hundred years later. And there was a great wind that rose up, but God wasn't in the wind. And then an earthquake happened but God wasn't in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but God wasn't in the fire either. But after the fire, Elijah heard a still small voice; "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And it was the voice of God. Awesome!

And this morning we meet Peter, James and John as they go with Jesus up another high mountain. And something awesome happens. Jesus changes right in front of them. His clothes become shining white. Then out of nowhere, Moses and Elijah show up and begin to have a conversation with Jesus. And Peter is afraid. It's too awesome! Then a

cloud appeared and put them all in a shadow, and a voice from Heaven says, “This is my son, my beloved, **listen** to him.”

Now, I’ve read this story of the Transfiguration more times than I can count, and preached on it more than once. I’ve always focused on what happens on the mountain top, that magnificent, glorious experience that connects Jesus back to his baptism and reveals his glory to his friends. Or I’ve focused on what happens afterwards. You can’t stay on the mountain top, you know, you can’t live forever in that ecstatic experience. You have to come down from the mountain top, back into the real world. Like Jesus does, setting his face towards Jerusalem and the completion of his mission. But as I was reading the story yet again this week, it occurred to me for the first time, that Jesus and Peter and James and John, had to get **up** the mountain. I presume it wasn’t a tiny hill but a real mountain. Which means they had to hike and they had to climb. And that’s hard work. Hiking up the mountain to meet God in that awesome place took a lot of effort.

Now, as I mentioned, I love to hike in the mountains. And you know it’s interesting that for all the stories about the awesome things that happen on the mountain tops in the Bible, we never hear anything about climbing the mountain. And I wonder why? I’ve hiked up lots of mountains and there’s more to it than these texts let on. These mountains and mountain tops are often understood as metaphors for the human encounter with God. And I think that is right. And if that’s the case, the climb up the mountain is also a pretty good metaphor for how we human beings approach God. When you begin a hike, you start out fresh and eager and everything around you looks beautiful and wonderful, but pretty soon as the climb gets steeper, you discover your body has limits and so does your soul. Body and soul need to be challenged and stretched and strengthened for the journey to continue.

When we’re young, our lives might seem most of the time like the beginning of that hike. We’re fresh, we’re excited, the scenery is beautiful and the ground not too steep. No tree roots to trip us up, no rushing streams to ford. But as we get older, the path gets more complex. The slope gets steeper and rockier. The hike gets more strenuous, filled with danger and unexpected dead ends. There are times on hikes like this where reaching our destination isn’t as big an issue as survival. As we get older still, the climb is exhausting, sometimes we just want to quit. We might find it easy to ignore God at the beginning of the hike when we are fresh and everything is beautiful and everything is possible. It’s when the path gets steep and treacherous that we’re more likely in our anxiety and fear to cry out to God. Finally, in those times when we do reach the top of the mountain, when we come to the end, or at least a resting place, in that long and difficult

journey – it’s there and then that we might catch a glimpse of grace and maybe even glimpses of glory. A place where we might know deep gratitude.

I had a hike like that last summer. The hike up to Oyster Dome in Whatcom County begins gently in beautiful canopied forest and I was excited to start. Switchbacks took me up to a lovely plateau where I stopped for some water and an energy bar and congratulated myself on what a good idea I’d had for coming on this hike. Setting off from the plateau, I soon found switchbacks to be a thing of the past. No sir, switchbacks, it seems, are for sissies. We were now heading straight up and I do mean straight up. The path got steeper and rockier until finally I was scrambling over boulders the size of VW’s with only the occasional orange mark to tell me I might be going in the right direction. I would see a break in the tree canopy and think “Oh, great, the crest must be close.” But no, that turned out to be an illusion. More rocks to climb. A couple of streams to ford – very, very carefully – and then more rocks. As the hike wore on, I began to despair that I would ever make it to the top. But turning back didn’t seem to be an option, so I pressed on, silently cursing that I had gotten myself into this difficult journey. And then, at last, a break in the unrelenting canopy which really did signal the top. I had arrived at last. Oyster Dome. And then before me lay Samish Bay and the San Juans beyond. It was almost too much to take in. The glittering bay, ships moving through the Straits, the profusion of islands and in the distance, just at the horizon, Victoria. I sat down on a large flat rock, bathed in sunshine on what had been a pretty cool July day, taking it all in. By and by, I put my pack behind my head and lay down, just for a moment I thought, but in my exhaustion, I nodded off into a little nap. And in that half awake, dream-like place, I was overcome with a sensation of goodness, of well-being, that all was right in the world. There was no doubt at all that God was present on that mountain top. There was a glimpse of grace and maybe even a glimpse of glory. But, man, it was sure hard work getting there.

And of course I couldn’t stay on the top of Oyster Dome, that particular mountain top, as wonderful as the experience of God’s glory was. It was down the mountain and back into life. Yet, back into life with a fresh knowing of God’s presence and God’s grace. And I’m pretty sure – no, I’m very sure – that I wouldn’t have had that encounter with the Holy One without the struggle up the mountain side, without facing despair and fear and exhaustion, and pushing through and beyond.

About 1400 years ago, St. Gregory of Nyssa said, “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb.” The climb is different for each of us. How long it will take and how much effort it may require, I can’t say because I’m still climbing. Some days the climb is steep and treacherous and exhausting and I get shaky

and short of breath. Is it worth it, this relentless climb towards God? Yes, it is worth it. It is worth it.

So here's a little secret to difficult hiking. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Don't think too much about the outcome. Don't worry too much about how far it is to the mountaintop. One step at a time. Pretty soon, the tiredness, the exhaustion, the despair – “will I ever make it?” give way to a kind of peace. Because I've found that beauty and grace and God's glory aren't just on the mountain top. It's there on the path too. So I'm going to keep hiking. I'm going to keep walking. Amen