

From the Mountain to the Valley

Mark 9:2-9

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This past summer my family went to Colorado for vacation. The cabin where we stay is at the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, and the mountain that we see from our back porch is Long's Peak, the tallest mountain in the park. Rising to over 14,000 feet, the silhouette of the peak has become a park icon. My father has climbed Long's Peak several times, as has my older brother.

It has long been a desire of mine to conquer the mountain, as well. I knew that Stuart was finally of an age to make the trek with me, so we began to make plans to climb the summit of Long's Peak. About a year ago I started to get in shape, preparing for what I knew would be an arduous climb.

Because of the likelihood of afternoon thunderstorms in the mountains, we started our hike at 2:00 in the morning. It was a beautiful night, clear skies, and even a meteor shower thrown in for effect. The change in elevation from the trailhead to the summit is nearly 5,000 feet, and the hike is eight miles one way. Stuart and I made the first six miles in just over three hours--we thought it was going to be a breeze. But the last mile and a half had us boulder hopping and climbing slick granite up the final 1,250 feet in elevation. The air at that altitude is thin, and having started my journey at sea level several days earlier, I was gasping for breath every fifty steps or so. Finally, after six hours Stuart and I made it to the summit of Long's Peak.

In more ways than one, it was a breathtaking experience. For one thing, even my somewhat disciplined attempt at physical conditioning didn't adequately prepare me for the rigors of the climb on my body. But for another thing, from the top of the mountain you gain a 360 degree perspective of the surrounding mountains and valleys; it was truly a glorious sight to behold, the majesty of God all around us!

After we ate breakfast and rested for about 30 minutes, I knew it was time to go back down to the valley below. We had been to the mountaintop, and we had experienced the glory and majesty of God's creation, but our life was down in the valley. We had climbed the mountain, but we couldn't stay, because our home was in the valley.

Mark tells us how Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain. And on that mountain the three disciples witnessed an amazing transfiguration of Jesus, surrounded by glory divine. It was an experience that probably left the disciples breathless. Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, and suddenly Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus. After Peter stuttered his way through some nonsense about building tents, a cloud surrounded them and the voice of God was heard from on high: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

The disciples wanted to stay up on the mountain. They wanted to bask in the glory they had just witnessed. They wanted to enjoy their taste of heaven a little longer.

But in the end, they had to go back down to the valley. The mountaintop is not meant to be a permanent place of residence for God's people. God's people belong in the valley.

To be sure, the mountaintop has its place in our life experiences. We could all use a mountaintop experience from time to time, a foretaste of glory divine. Those kinds of extraordinary experiences when we encounter God's glory and majesty and presence and love are meant to encourage us during the ordinariness of life. Moments when we experience unexpected grace and joy and assurance--like a groom watching his bride come down the aisle on their wedding day, or witnessing the birth of a baby, or driving around the corner after a rainstorm and suddenly being confronted with a beautiful rainbow, or a spontaneous hug from a friend who didn't even know that you needed a hug at that moment, or watching the sun rise over the ocean, or hearing the voices in the choir find perfect harmony in their voices--moments when we experience sudden, unexpected grace and joy and assurance are mountaintop moments that help carry us through the valleys and level times of ordinary life.

There are countless stories of people who have had near-death experiences, times when their heart stopped on the operating table and they got a glimpse of what the next life is like. Studies have been conducted with people who have had such experiences, and the overwhelming consensus among patients is an increase in a sense of peace. They have had a glimpse of what awaits them, so they have come to sense that it's worth enduring this life in order to get to the next. They have been dazzled by the light, and the experience gives them a special peace and assurance as they live out the rest of their lives on earth.

Mountaintop experiences are glimpses of heaven. They give us peace and strength for the journey of everyday life.

We need the mountaintop experiences. But we can't stay on the mountaintop. We belong in the valley. Life is lived in the valley, not on the mountaintop. But it is the mountaintop experiences that help us get through life in the valley.

On the mountaintop we encounter almighty God in all his splendor and glory; and we need that encounter, because in the valley we are assaulted by brokenness and evil in our world.

On the mountaintop we hear the calming voice of God; and we need that sense of peace, because in the valley we encounter chaos and urgency.

On the mountaintop followers of Christ are inspired to worship; and we need that experience, because in the valley Christ's disciples are often spoiling for a fight.

On the mountaintop we get a glimpse of the heavenly glory that awaits us; and we need that glimpse, because in the valley life is hard and painful.

We need the mountaintop experiences, for the mountaintop experiences are the ones that remind us that all of God's purposes find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It is the mountaintop experiences that encourage us to turn to Jesus and listen to him. In the cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention, it is the mountaintop experiences that help reorient ourselves toward Jesus, that we may follow as he leads. The mountaintop experiences help us hear the voice of God that says, "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him."

And it is the mountaintop experience that reminds us that the way of Jesus, though it ends in glory, must also lead through self-sacrifice and suffering. On Wednesday we will observe Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. As we begin the journey toward Easter, we do well to be mindful of the fact that the road to Easter must first pass through Jerusalem, and Calvary, and to the tomb. We must resist what Reinhold Niebuhr once called the "gospel of success," a kingdom without judgment and a Christ without a cross.¹ Instead, we must listen to Jesus when he calls us to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses daily and follow him on the road that leads to conflict with our world. But it is conflict for the purpose of redemption and transformation. And because

we have glimpsed the glory of God on the mountain, and because we know that judgment and the cross will result in the empty tomb, then we can endure the valley as we follow Jesus' footsteps.

It is the moments on the mountaintop that help us to endure faithfully life in the valley.

On April 3, 1968, a preacher ascended the pulpit of the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ. He concluded his sermon with these words:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The preacher was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. And the next day he was assassinated. But he had been to the mountaintop, and so he was prepared to endure anything that came upon him in the valley. He knew what glory awaited him, and so he found purpose in his life in the valley.

We need to go up to the mountain. But we must live in the valley. This journey we call Lent will take us through the valley of conflict, and persecution, and suffering. And ultimately we will be confronted by sin in all its power. Yet we have been on the mountaintop, and we have beheld the glory of God. And that's enough to help us endure the valley. Amen.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted in Fred Anderson, "A Thin Place in Life", March 2, 2003, www.mapc.org