

The Roller Coaster Ride of Faith

Luke 9:28-43

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2010

In the 1989 movie, *Parenthood*, Steve Martin plays role of the central figure, Gil Buckman. Gil Buckman is a cautious man, and he tries to be protective of his young son, Kevin, who is a very anxious little boy. One night Gil and his wife Karen are arguing about life in general, and Karen points out that Gil tries to make life too safe and predictable, like a merry-go-round, when in fact life is more like a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, twists and turns.

Later on Gil and Karen are at their son's school play. They had been concerned about Kevin's anxiety, especially with Kevin having lines in the play. Just before Kevin's part in the play, something goes terribly wrong, as one of Kevin's cousins in the audience is scared by something he sees on the stage, and the little cousin runs onto the stage to try to stop it. Characters start to trip over each other, and the stage set begins to fall down all around a very nervous-looking Kevin.

In the meantime, Gil is in his seat, white-knuckled as he grips the armrests nervously. In his mind he envisions himself sitting in the front car of a roller coaster, with the click-click-click of the chains pulling the roller coaster up the highest hill. Then all of a sudden he feels his stomach tighten up as the roller coaster plunges down the hill, around a corner, through a loopity-loop. What's going on in the school auditorium is just like that ride on the roller coaster—chaotic, out of control, and there's nothing Gil can do but ride it out. Then something happens. Gil exhales, relaxes, and smiles. He realizes that it doesn't have to be something to fear, but an adventure to embrace. Life can't be controllable like a merry-go-round; it's always going to be like a roller coaster, and so you might as well take in everything you can while you're riding.

In many ways, the life of discipleship is like a roller coaster ride. Filled with ups and downs, peaks and valleys, twists and turns—as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to engage our faith in our everyday lives. The story of the transfiguration of Jesus captures a portion of that roller coaster ride for us. Even though we quickly find Jesus and Peter, James, and John on the top of the mountain, the story actually begins and ends down in the valley. Just prior to this story we find Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, which Jesus immediately follows with a prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and then with a teaching that anyone who chooses to follow Jesus must take up their own cross daily and follow him.

Not exactly something that would inspire enthusiasm in his hearers, especially since the cross was not a pleasant symbol to use as decorative jewelry or to adorn sanctuaries; for Jesus' hearers, the cross was an instrument of suffering, torture, and agonizing death. Indeed, before the disciples could ascend the mountain, they had to start in the valley—the valley of impending suffering and death.

But they didn't stay in the valley. Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to accompany him to the top of the mountain, so they could pray. Jesus was taking them out of the valley, to a place where they could find some peace and quiet, and connect with God. And according to Luke, the disciples connected with God in an amazing experience, as they witnessed the dazzling glory of Jesus accompanied by Moses and Elijah, with the exclamation point being added by the voice of God from the cloud: This is my son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. It was a moment of awe and wonder. It was a moment of affirmation of the redemptive mission of Jesus. It was a moment of confirmation for the disciples, that Jesus was indeed the appropriate object of their faith.

And it was tempting for them to want to bask in the moment, to memorialize it and to make it their own private, special moment. That's understandable, isn't it? We all want to take time to let God's glory soak in, to rest in the peace that passes understanding. We love those mountaintop experiences, because they're exhilarating, and they give us new perspectives. I would venture to guess that there are not many who, after waking up to the glorious white blanket of snow yesterday morning, were anxious to see it go away quickly. We wanted to enjoy the moment, to make time stand still for a while. We love the mountaintop experiences for the inspiration they give. But we don't live on the mountaintop. We have to come down from the mountain, and re-engage with life in the valley. Life isn't on the top of the mountain—it's down here in the lowlands.

And so Jesus and his disciples left the mountain and they journeyed back down into the valley below. And in the valley they immediately found themselves in the midst of crowd that was clamoring for Jesus. From the noise of the crowd there arose a desperate shout from a father beseeching healing for his demon-possessed son. When the demon threw the boy down to the ground in convulsions, Jesus cast the evil spirit out and healed the boy.

Do you feel the roller coaster? You start in the valley, and you make the slow arduous climb up to the mountaintop, where you feel the thrill and excitement of an experience with Jesus in all his glory, only to be plunged once again into the valley, where the twists and turns jerk you around and disorient you, where life is messy and not so refreshing.

But that's to be the pattern of our life of discipleship. Our life of faith is like a roller coaster ride. We'll have our moments of exhilaration and breathtaking awe and wonder, but we'll also have those times when life is confusing and intimidating and even frightening. Our Lord's example reminds us that we are called not simply to take in those mountaintop experiences, but to engage in the life in the valley below as well. Because it is in the valley below where we can best be about doing the redemptive work of Christ.

The mountaintop experiences are there to remind us that there is more to reality than we can touch, see, or imagine. They are the reminders that God is more than we can control or dictate or wrap our arms around. The mountaintop experiences are a gift. They are meant to be enjoyed and savored, but the moment we try to memorialize them or enshrine them, we have taken our focus away from the God whom we encountered, and we have begun to worship the experiences themselves. Mountaintop experiences are given to us to inspire us for faithful life in the valley below. Our mountaintop experiences should be seen as "unmerited gifts from God and resources for service to others... We can reminisce about our experiences,

caressing them and massaging them as an excuse to disengage from the world. Or we can allow them to prepare us for what God calls us to do next.”¹

You see, God isn't just with us on the mountaintop. The mountaintop gives us those momentary special glimpses of what is always true: God is with us, and God's spirit is always there to strengthen and nourish us and guide us as we engage the world in the redemptive work of Christ.

Presbyterian minister Susan Andrews tells a story of when she was a young seminarian doing her obligatory clinical pastoral education in a local hospital. “One day... there was a new patient--a man in isolation--all alone in a room--hanging between life and death--both legs amputated, but with gangrene still creeping through his body. You could smell the stench of his decay even before you entered the room, and he moaned and sweated in a miserable delirium. For an hour I wandered up and down the hall,” said Andrews, “resisting going to see him--nauseated by his disease and at a total loss as to what to do. What could I--a naïve, twenty-five year old woman--possibly do or say to ease this man's suffering? For that matter, what could God do? And where was God, anyway, in the midst of all this misery. Finally,” she continued, “I walked into the room, took his hand, and found myself repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer. And that's when it happened. That's when the holy broke into the human--when God took over and grace flowed through me. This man stopped moaning, his eyes stopped rolling, his body stopped shaking. He turned to look at me and then started repeating the words of the Lord's Prayer with me. And for a moment, time stood still. There was, in that room a peace that passes all understanding. A few minutes later, after I left the room, that man's suffering ended. He died, finding his own peace at last.”²

God isn't just with us on the mountaintop. The reason we have those mountaintop experiences are to renew us and to remind us that God is with us everywhere, and God is using us to accomplish his purposes. And you and I are called to avail ourselves to the work of God in this messy, chaotic world of ours.

On Thursday I attended a seminar sponsored by the Safe Families Initiative of Georgetown County. It was aimed at providing clergy and church leaders with information about the severity of domestic violence in our communities, and ways we can help. Domestic violence is destroying women and children and families across the nation. South Carolina ranks #8 in the nation in the number of domestic violence cases per year; in the state, Georgetown County is the second-highest in domestic violence incidents. One of the things that the speakers emphasized over and over is how churches must be willing to name domestic violence for the sin that it is, that we can't remain silent about it.

You see, we can't stay on the mountain. We have to come down to the valley, because it's down in the valley where we will engage with a world that is broken and messy and suffering. It's down in the valley where we are called to offer healing and redemption in the name of Jesus Christ.

The mandate is clear, says John Buchanan. “For the church, and for us as individuals, the mountaintop may be here, as we experience God's goodness and presence... And for the church, here and everywhere, and for each one of us... the call is to follow the Lord down from the mountain into the valley of human need.”³

¹ Phyllis Kersten, “Off the Mountain,” *The Christian Century*, February 7-14, 2001, p. 13.

² Susan Andrews, “Facing God,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, February / March, 2004, p. 29.

³ John Buchanan, “Experience-Listen-Follow,” February 25, 2001, www.fourthchurch.org

Enjoy the mountaintop. Soak in the mountaintop. But don't stay on the mountaintop, for the real work of faith is down in the valley below. Amen.