

Welcome back to our Lenten journey to the cross, and beyond; everyone is invited for this is a trip for all of God's people. Hopefully, you have your hiking boots with you - today we're going mountain climbing.

Living in Utah, standing on top of a mountain perhaps isn't so special. Growing up in Wisconsin, even seeing a mountain was awe inspiring. Driving across Colorado, you start to see a thin dark line on the horizon; the line thickens, starts to have a ragged shape, then becomes an incredible wall of mountains abruptly rising out of the plains.

Years ago, Dorothy and I hiked to the top of one of those mountains. At the summit, I leaned on a massive rock, three or four feet thick and as large as this chancel. I could see an awesome panorama of 14 thousand foot mountain peaks marching off into the distance. There were a few views down into the deep valleys. There were just the two of us, no sign of other people, no sounds of traffic; just us and the mountains. Peaceful and serene, I could imagine God was just an arm's length away; it was as if the gentle breeze were the very breath of God. I wanted to stay on top of that mountain; I yearned to bask in God's presence.

Jesus took Peter and James and John up to the top of a mountain as well. Their experience was anything but peaceful and serene. That small group had hiked up together; no one else was on that mountain. But, suddenly Moses and Elijah were there with them! Where'd they come from? How did they get there - crossing both distance and centuries of time?

Peter, instinctively blurted out "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Shrewd! Kind of like the circus coming to town. Take an empty field, throw up some tents, bring in the caged animals and the side shows, and start charging admission. Sure, your real motive is to provide them shelter, but why waste an opportunity? Send John and James down the mountain to advertise: Come see the Son of God, Elijah, Moses! Get your

questions answered! Be led in prayer like you have never prayed before! Meditation topics freely shared! Sit at the very feet of the greatest people of God of all time! Come to the mountain top and be close to God, be with God!

Inviting spectators. Come, watch what God is doing today. No risk. No minimum stay.

If a couple of people had appeared on that Colorado mountain top, I would have been surprised, even a little afraid, since there was a clear view of the trail to the top - and no one else was climbing it. To realize in some mysterious way that the visitors were the prophets of old would start me quaking in my boots. Only God can make such things happen; why now? Why me? I don't think that I could have thought as quickly as Peter. However, like Peter, I am sure I would have blurted out whatever came to mind.

Come to the mountain top, be close to God! What a great idea! Just as I did on that hike years ago, I yearn to be close to God, to sit in the peace and beauty and serenity of the mountain top as I enjoy the divine presence. What could possible be more relaxing? Don't you agree? When we want a few spiritual nuggets to ponder, we could enter a shelter, seek wisdom. Then we could come back out and enjoy the breath taking view as we leisurely ponder a new idea.

Its great to be a spectator, watching God at work, seeking wisdom, relaxing in the beauty of God's creation. Feeling free to stay or to leave at any time.

And then, suddenly a bright cloud surrounded the disciples. From within the cloud, came a voice; not just a voice, but the voice of God: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Suddenly, the mountain top isn't so peaceful. Suddenly, you realize that the three great people are not going to patiently sit in their shelters doling out wisdom on demand. Suddenly, you are in the very presence of God. And God is telling you what to do. This isn't something to ponder, something to casually take outside and meditate upon as you soak in the view. This is a divine

demand to decide: either listen to Jesus or do not listen, ignore, Jesus, the Son of God.

Peter and John and James are terrified! They all fall to their faces in fear. Interestingly, those who most often react to Jesus with fear are those who know him best.

Perhaps it is like an ant looking up at an elephant. It does not matter if the elephant says it loves you. It does not matter if the elephant says it wants to treat you as part of the family. That huge gray elephant still takes up your entire horizon, it is all you can see. There is no way to guess what the elephant might be thinking, might do next. The consequences of an inadvertently misplaced foot are terrifying; even more terrifying is the thought of getting the elephant upset! There is fear, absolute awe, in realizing how much bigger the elephant is than you are, bigger, more different, than you can comprehend.

Throughout the book of Matthew, people have been coming to Jesus, coming to be healed, to ask questions, to see the Son of God. Now, Jesus reverses this: Jesus lovingly comes to Peter, John and James as they cower in fright, he reassures them. To listen to Jesus, to obey God, means that they must reaffirm their decision to follow Jesus. They followed when Jesus first called them, not knowing who he was nor where he was leading. Now, they are called anew to follow Jesus. They are still learning what it means to follow the Son of God, still learning about the cross where Jesus is going, where they are being led. Clearly, following means leaving the beautiful vistas of that mountain top; exchanging the limitless horizons for the narrow confines of the valley, trading the peace for the noise of the village, leaving the serenity for the reality of life.

Jesus made few promises. Jesus refused to be confined to a shelter, on display, did not meekly offer sage advice once a week to any who might climb the mountain. Jesus came to the people, confronted them with a simple choice: Follow Me, or not. Facing God, especially a God who lets disciples make their own decisions, is

frightening! Imagine Peter, good old foot in the mouth Peter, being confronted with this choice. He is good at following when things are spelled out for him; he is not so good thinking things through, making decisions on his own. Imagine his terror of having seen inexplicable things happen on the mountain, seeing again that God can do things beyond comprehension, and now being in the presence of God, clearly hearing the voice of God. And then honestly asking himself: “Am I listening?”

Suddenly, the disciples know that the real choice is whether they are to be spectators or followers; watchers or servers; curious or committed. There are no middle of the road alternatives. Perhaps they had an image created in their own minds of what a proper god should be like: a gentle being that let them watch, mouth agape, amazed at the miracles, relaxing together on the mountain top, one they could summon on demand when things got tough. Perhaps they desired to have a god that lets them be spectators. The voice of the living God, the God of the cloud, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, the creator God, the God that led Ruth to Israel, that invited Mary to become a unique mother, the God who called the disciples, and calls us; this God clearly demands more.

We are people who fear. 9/11. The doctor saying: “I'd like to run a few more tests.” Will we be able to afford retirement? We fear the unknowns, the unexpected the disruptions of our reality. But this fear when encountering God is a very different fear. This is fear that comes from a face to face encounter with Jesus. He had just told the disciples that he will suffer and be killed. And, if we listen, he still tells us that we must pick up our own crosses and follow him.

Just like Peter, James and John, Jesus confronts us, and then calms our fears. We fear that God might ask too much of us, that God might think we are more capable than we really are. We fear that we might disappoint God, make God angry. Jesus wants to lead us off of our wonderful mountain top, or wherever it is we have come to safely

encounter God on our terms. When God is a little more distant it can be very serene and peaceful there. Then God draws near; God speaks: "Listen to him!" and our life is changed. Jesus makes few promises as he leads us back to the stress, the grime, the noise of everyday life: it isn't always beautiful down in the valley, following Jesus.

But there is a promise that Jesus does make: He will be with us always. He does love us, does want us as part of the family. Unlike the elephant, he will never inadvertently misplace his foot upon us. He will come to us when we are terrified. He will push us to our limits, limits far beyond what we think we are capable of, as he transforms us from spectators to followers, watchers to servers; curious to committed. Jesus will always be there to support us as we are changed.

As we, part of God's people, journey to the cross and beyond this Lent, we will need our hiking shoes. We do not need them to climb mountains, for Jesus still comes to us wherever we might be. We need them when confronted by the voice of God, when we decide to follow Jesus down into the messy valley of life. We will need good hiking shoes because answering God will take us to places we never imagined visiting. Places as close as serving this congregation, or the homeless of Salt Lake, or on a Mexico mission trip. Where is God leading you?

Spectators are still part of God's people. But be forewarned, they seldom remain as spectators when they encounter the presence of the living God.

Lord, may we all encounter you, hear your voice, and listen. May you calm our fears as we listen and follow. Amen.