



***Theme: Jesus and the earliest gospel...Mark
"From the Mountain into the Valley"***

Sermon preached by Aaron Strietzel

March 13-14, 2021

Weekly Memory Verse:

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

– Mark 9:35b

Scripture Readings:

Mark 8:31-10:31

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

So I have to confess that the story of Jesus' transfiguration has always felt out of place, out of context, like it came from left field.

Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem where he knows his death is immanent, and he takes aside three of his closest companions – Peter, James, and John, and they hike up a mountain. Jesus has a transformation experience and appears to glow, the text says:

- *His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*

As he talks with two dudes who have been dead for many years – Elijah and Moses – which I find interesting.

What are we to make of this story?

Why do writers include this experience in their retelling of the gospel story?

Mountains

It's interesting to note the importance of mountains in the Bible. In ancient cultures, they believed that the gods lived just above the clouds, somewhere just out of sight, but not that far away. They would establish "high places" – usually places on ridgetops or mountains – the idea being they could hike these "high places" and connect more easily with the gods.

We see this idea throughout the Bible, perhaps especially in the life of Moses, who encounters God at several key points in his life on the tops of mountains.

- In Exodus 3, we read about Moses encountering God in a burning bush at Mt Horeb, which the text informs us was called the "mountain of God."
- Later, Moses encounters God on Mt Sinai, where he receives the 10 commandments

In the biblical text, mountains are often the high places, where people have direct experiences of God.

These stories of mountains are easy for those of us living in SW Colorado to connect with aren't they?

Pike Peak

- Has anyone here ever been on top of Pikes Peak?
- Anyone ever climb to the top of Pikes Peak?

I remember climbing Pikes Peak, just outside of Colorado Springs for the first time. My wife and I were hiking with friends, and we woke up before the sun and started off with headlamps. I grew up hiking often, so I thought I was prepared, but hiking up Pikes Peak, starting at 6,707 ft we had to climb up a total of 7,408 ft to reach the summit. I still remember feeling like we were almost to the top, and as we finally arrived seeing that we weren't to the top yet. This happened several times.

- Have you ever experienced what many call a false summit?
 - A false summit is when you think you see the top, only when you finally get there you realize it isn't the top and there's more to climb.

This happened to me multiple times during our ascent on Pikes Peak.

- Oftentimes in our lives we experience false summits, don't we?
 - We've been working so hard, thinking we will finally have a break, get that promotion, achieve financial security or physical health, only to "arrive" and realize we aren't there yet. It's a discouraging feeling isn't it?

Yet, after what felt like too many hours, we finally arrived at the summit of Pikes Peak. I had been there before, as a child, but I didn't recall the beauty and wonder that I experienced in front of me as I looked around – 360 degrees – and could see for miles and miles.

Oh, the satisfaction of feeling exhausted, yet experiencing the transcendent beauty of being on one of the highest points around. And being on top of a mountain is a transcendent experience. There is something about it. I do feel a sense of closeness to God. I think that our ancient ancestors were on to something when they set aside these high points as sacred places to encounter the divine.

We sat on the peak for some time. We ate, drank lots of water, walked around, and of course took selfies, as proof that we did indeed accomplish this mighty

Yet there is also a truth we don't talk about as much. After Peter, James and John experienced the mountain top, after seeing Jesus transformed as he spoke with Elijah and Moses, we read

Slide ***Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*** **- Mark 9:5**

I think in many ways Peter wanted to hang out in that place. I mean, can you blame him? Like Peter, we want to hang out on the mountain top, heck...let's build a dwelling, there right?

But our lives are not static, they are dynamic. Faith isn't about staying in one place. Faith is a journey and it invites us to continue on the path, even if that path invites us into the valley.

Lent

The season of Lent is a reminder that descent is part of the faith journey. Jesus descending from the mountain into a deep dark valley as he walked toward Jerusalem...toward his death. I don't know about you, but I would much rather hang out on the mountain tops, experiencing the beauty and wonder of God's presence, than descend into a valley! Yet eventually we must descend.

2020 and now 2021 has been a difficult season.

Many lost jobs, financial security, health, some even lost close friends or family members. Families all across our nation and in many parts of the world had to find ways to juggle work and schooling their children at home. Small business owners struggled. I know there have been at least five restaurants in Durango that have closed down due to the pandemic. Our country experienced a lot of pain as we sought to navigate a global pandemic, injustice, and a polarizing political season.

I bet, for most of us, this past year has felt like a descent. It has brought pain, struggle, uncertainty and discomfort.

However, most often in Christianity we talk about a spirituality of ascent and thus we don't know how to deal with the valleys. The primary way many Christians understand Valley's in their lives is that they have to bear through them. If this is our understanding, then we miss the gifts and the wisdom the valley is meant to bring to us.

Ronald Rolheiser is a Catholic author and spiritual teacher who has written numerous wonderful books on spiritual formation. He talks about two different spiritualities, the spirituality of ascent and the spirituality of descent.

- Concerning the spirituality of ascent, Rolheiser writes:

The challenge comes with an invitation that invites us upwards, towards a spirituality of the ascent. All spiritualities worthy of the name, stress the need to make a certain ascent, to grow beyond our immaturities, our laziness, our wounds, and the perennial hedonism and shallowness of our culture. The emphasis here is always to reach upward, beyond, towards the heavens, and towards all that is more noble, altruistic, compassionate, loving, admirable, and saintly. Much of classical Christian spirituality is a spirituality of the ascent, an invitation to something higher, an invitation to be true to what is deepest inside of us, namely, the Image and Likeness of God.

- But Rolheiser challenges the notion that a spirituality of ascent is enough, writing...

But the challenge to growth also needs a spirituality of descent, a vision and a set of disciplines that point us not just towards the rising sun, but also towards the setting sun. We need a spirituality that doesn't avoid or deny the

complexities of life, the mad conspiracy of forces beyond us, the paralyzing losses and depressions in life, and the looming reality of sickness, diminishment, and death. Sometimes we can only grow by descending into that frightening underworld, where, like Jesus, we undergo a transformation by facing chaos, diminishment, darkness, satanic forces, and death itself. In some ancient cultures this was called “sitting in the ashes” or “being a child of Saturn” (the archetypal planet of depression). As Christians we call this undergoing the paschal mystery. Whatever the name, all spiritualities worthy of the name will, at some time in your life, invite you to make a painful descent into the frightening underworld of chaos, depression, loss, insignificance, darkness, satanic forces, and death itself.

As Christians, we tend to focus on the positive, the ascent, the mountain tops. However, Jesus himself shows us that descent is a part of our spiritual formation.

Slide **⁹ When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things. - Ephesians 4:9-10**

We should look at the death of Jesus as the ultimate descent. One Christian authors reminds us of the importance of both ascent and descent when he writes the following:

Metaphors of darkness, descent, and unknowing are found throughout the Bible: caves, clouds, the Exodus, exile, the belly of the whale, wilderness, and desert. Within Scripture we also see a spirituality of light, ascent, and knowing which is represented by mountaintop images, especially Sinai, Horeb, Tabor, and the Mount of the

Beatitudes. “The pillar of flame by night and the pillar of cloud by day” (Exodus 13:21-22) are both good guides, but not one without the other!

A spirituality of descent balances a spirituality of ascent and brings a more holistic approach. Both the mountains and the valleys in our lives have much to teach us. We should be careful when we judge one as good and the other as bad.

May this Lenten season remind us that descent is just as much a part of our spiritual journey as ascent, that the valleys and difficult times in our lives are opportunities for growth and discovery. May we be reminded that God is with us in the valleys just as much as the mountain tops.

Amen.