

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, February 26, 2017

Exodus 24:12-18

The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples

heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Let us pray....Amen.

3 years ago, our family used the February break from school to visit the Grand Canyon in Arizona. We flew into Phoenix, rented a van to drive to a town called Williams, north of Flagstaff, and then took a train north to the Grand Canyon National Park on the South rim.

From the moment we started heading north, the elevation began to rise. Phoenix is already 1000 feet above sea level. And the further north we traveled, the higher the elevation. Markers on the highway told us when we had reached 2000 feet, then 3, then 4 then 5 and so on until we were just outside Williams, at about 7000 feet.

To put things into some kind of perspective, Mt. Marcy, the highest peak in the Adirondack mountains is a little over 5000 feet. Mount Washington, the highest peak in New England is a little over 6000 feet.

The train from Williams took us the final 60 miles into the park, and we went up another 1000 feet, so that by the time we reached the south rim of the canyon, we were at 8000 feet.

Standing on the edge of one of the most majestic and awesome canyons in the world, where the land looked flat as a pancake, we were higher than the highest peak in New England, and we weren't even on a mountain!

And even though we weren't technically on a mountain, our experience there, our presence on the rim of the Grand Canyon can be considered a 'Mountain-top Experience'.

Mountain-top Experiences are moments when we feel absolutely exhilarated, almost overwhelmed, a real high point in our lives, so to speak. They don't have to actually occur on a mountain-top, they can occur anywhere, at any time in our lives. But it's the exhilaration and the thought that it sure would be nice if we could stay right there in that moment that sets a Mountain-top experience apart from other moments in our lives.

Everybody has a Mountain-top experience or two in their lives. A moment when your breath is taken from you by the beauty of what you are seeing, or by the impact of what you have seen.

Other Mountain-top experiences in my life include living in India, climbing one of the Alps in Austria, and renting a cottage on Cayuga lake with Betsy and the girls.

There may be more, but these are the moments when I felt like I just wanted time to stand still, so I could bask in the moment for as long as I liked.

Can you think of one of *your* Mountain-top experiences? A time when *you* were so exhilarated, overwhelmed, when you had your breath taken away by what you were feeling? If you can remember that feelings, then you are close to understanding what Peter was feeling on the mountain with Jesus.

Our gospel lesson this morning describes what happened when Peter, James, and John went up on a mountain with Jesus. There, they saw Jesus glow a dazzling white, his face shone like the sun. At that moment, Peter's thought was to build Jesus a dwelling, so he could stay there all the time.

As far as I can tell from the text, Jesus ignored Peter, didn't he? See, one the most important aspects of Mountain-top Experiences is that we can't stay in them. They are fleeting. Or life moves on. Or it's impractical based on the realities of life.

Whatever reasons Jesus had in taking James, John, and Peter up to the mountain, where he had them glimpse his transfiguration, one thing was

sure: they were *not* going to be staying up there hanging out with Moses and Elijah. There was serious work to be done!

Now, doesn't that resonate with our own lives? We experience moments where we wish time would stand still and we could stay in the moment forever, but ultimately we know that we can't stay, life moves on, and we have a powerful memory of our exhilaration and our excitement.

And after all, would we *really* want to isolate ourselves on a mountain-top, stuck in an experience that is meant to be fleeting? It's OK if you say yes! But I think we'd all have to agree that reliving a Mountain-top Experience over and over and over would get old eventually. We can't remain fixed in an experience like that. That's not living life.

And that's not what Jesus had in mind when he went up to the mountain. In this version, he merely ignores Peter, in another, he rebukes him, and tells him that he doesn't have his mind on the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mountain-top Experiences can motivate us, feed us, remind us of what is important. They can sustain us during difficult times. And we can spend much of our lives seeking them. But they can't last more than a moment or two. They aren't designed to be anything more than fleeting moments of awesomeness!

Our Hebrew Scripture tells of Moses, going up to the mountain to meet God. He stayed there for 40 days and 40 nights, but *he did not stay up there forever*. Moses still had work to do, life to live, faith to explore.

Mountain-top experiences enrich our lives. They add excitement, spice, and a healthy appreciation for God's beautiful world. I love reflecting on my own Mountain-top Experiences, and I hope you enjoy reflecting on your own.

But ultimately we can't dwell there. We have to move on. Our family had to pack up from the south rim of the Grand Canyon, and take the train back to Williams. We saw different things on the way back than we did heading into the park.

When we left Williams, we went a different way, and saw even more amazing sights in Sedona. And, as we made our way to Phoenix, we got closer and closer to ground level.

Arriving back in Syracuse, I knew I had had another Mountain-top Experience. And I also knew I wouldn't be able to stay in it. Now, that doesn't mean some people shouldn't at least try: practically everybody who served us, waited on us, or sold us something came from some place other than Arizona. That tells me that a lot of people go to Arizona and have Mountain-top experiences, and a lot of people try and stay to recreate them.

But their days weren't filled with exhilaration and excitement. Hopefully their weekends were!

By and large, very few people can make their living staying in Mountain-top experiences. It's too much. It's not for everyday living.

I give thanks to God for my experiences, and for the insight they have given me so far, and for whatever insight they will give me in the future. We can always learn from our Mountain-top Experiences, no matter how long ago they occurred.

But I give even more thanks for my daily life. The one that is sustained by those fleeting moments of awe and beauty. The routine, the responsibility, the challenges. The stuff real life is made of.

Moses and Jesus knew that those moments were meant to galvanize them, steel them for the challenges ahead. We know that too.

Just before we left for Phoenix, Betsy and I ran into a parishioner from Fairmount at Wegmans. You should have seen the look in his eye when we told him we were going to try and go through Sedona on our way back to Phoenix. I could tell that he had had a Mountain-top Experience there. It was all over his face.

Now I know why.

On the eve of our Lenten Journey, may our Mountain-top Experiences help us along the way, though our challenges and our temptations. But when all is said and done, may we have the wisdom to know when we must move on from our mountain tops.

Jesus helped Peter, and James, and John, and I suspect he can help us too.
Amen.