

UNCLIMBED MOUNTAINS

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Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

***“...Jesus took with him Peter and John and James,
and went up on the mountain to pray.”***

Luke 9:28b

They say that, long ago, they used to teach in seminaries that the ideal sermon ought to have three points and end with a poem. I don't know if they ever *really* taught that, but it's been something of a joke among preachers ever since, a by-word for a pedestrian and uninspired sermon. “Three points and a poem.” Hum.

Just to keep things interesting, this sermon's not going to end with a poem, it'll begin with one. The poem's a little on the long side, and it tells a story — a story of a chance encounter with an old-time New England farmer. So, I invite you to listen in...

THE MOUNTAIN, by Robert Frost

**The mountain held the town as in a shadow.
I saw so much before I slept there once:
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.
Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.
And yet between the town and it I found,
When I walked forth at dawn to see new things,**

Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields.
The river at the time was fallen away,
And made a widespread brawl on cobble-stones;
But the signs showed what it had done in spring;
Good grass-land gullied out, and in the grass
Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark.
I crossed the river and swung round the mountain.
And there I met a man who moved so slow
With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart,
It seemed no harm to stop him altogether.
'What town is this?' I asked.

'This? Lunenburg.'

Then I was wrong: the town of my sojourn,
Beyond the bridge, was not that of the mountain,
But only felt at night its shadowy presence.
'Where is your village? Very far from here?'

*'There is no village — only scattered farms.
We were but sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!'* He moved his goad.
The mountain stood there to be pointed at.
Pasture ran up the side a little way,
And then there was a wall of trees with trunks:
After that only tops of trees, and cliffs
Imperfectly concealed among the leaves.
A dry ravine emerged from under boughs
Into the pasture.

'That looks like a path.
Is that the way to reach the top from here? —
Not for this morning, but some other time:
I must be getting back to breakfast now.'

*'I don't advise your trying from this side.
There is no proper path, but those that have
Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's.
That's five miles back. You can't mistake the place:
They logged it there last winter some way up.
I'd take you, but I'm bound the other way.'*

'You've never climbed it?'

*'I've been on the sides
Deer-hunting and trout-fishing. There's a brook
That starts up on it somewhere — I've heard say
Right on the top, tip-top — a curious thing.
But what would interest you about the brook,
It's always cold in summer, warm in winter.
One of the great sights going is to see
It steam in winter like an ox's breath.
Until the bushes all along its banks
Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles —
You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it !'*

*'There ought to be a view around the world
From such a mountain — if it isn't wooded
Clear to the top.' I saw through leafy screens
Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,
Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up —
With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet;
Or turn and sit on and look out and down,
With little ferns in crevices at his elbow.*

*'As to that I can't say. But there's the spring,
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.
That ought to be worth seeing.'*

'If it's there....

You never saw it?'

*'I guess there's no doubt
About its being there. I never saw it.
It may not be right on the very top:
It wouldn't have to be a long way down
To have some head of water from above,
And a good distance down might not be noticed
By anyone who'd come a long way up.
One time I asked a fellow climbing it
To look and tell me later how it was.'*

'What did he say?'

*'He said there was a lake
Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top.'*

'But a lake's different. What about the spring?'

*'He never got up high enough to see.
That's why I don't advise your trying this side.
He tried this side. I've always meant to go
And look myself, but you know how it is:
It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.
What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time?
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
'Wouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.'*

*'I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to —
Not for the sake of climbing. What's its name?'*

'We call it Hor: I don't know if that's right.'

'Can one walk round it? Would it be too far?'

*'You can drive round and keep in Lunenburg,
But it's as much as ever you can do,
The boundary lines keep in so close to it.
Hor is the township, and the township's Hor -
And a few houses sprinkled round the foot,
Like boulders broken off the upper cliff,
Rolled out a little farther than the rest.'*

'Warm in December, cold in June, you say?'

*'I don't suppose the water's changed at all.
You and I know enough to know it's warm
Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm.
But all the fun's in how you say a thing.'*

'You've lived here all your life?'

*'Ever since Hor
Was no bigger than a —' What, I did not hear.*

**He drew the oxen toward him with light touches
Of his slim goad on nose and offside flank,
Gave them their marching orders, and was moving.**

It's a famous poem of Robert Frost's, "The Mountain." At its heart is an ordinary conversation between two people, that somehow manages to traffic in the profound....

**“It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.”**

Don't you think there's something sad about this farmer, who's spent his entire life staring up at the mountain, but never once ventured as far as the summit? All he knows about it — and about the mysterious, storied spring near the top — he's learned secondhand, from hearsay. And there it was, all along. He could have set out upon the trail: but didn't.

I wonder how it is for us — about that most essential and enduring feature of our lives, our knowledge of God? Does all that you and I know of God depend on the hearsay of others — or does it find its grounding in something we've experienced firsthand? If someone were to stop you or me, and ask us what it's like to have a “mountaintop experience,” would we be able to share anything meaningful?

I suppose that's a question Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John would have had a hard time answering: until that day they followed their Master up the side of that mountain, huffing and puffing all the way to the summit.

At the top, they saw something wholly unexpected: not a bubbling spring, whose water seemed to run cool in summer and hot in winter, but Jesus

“transfigured” before them. When it was all over, they knew: life, for them, would never be the same again.

No one can say, for sure, what that experience was... the best guess, I think, is that it was some kind of vision:

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory...

Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of Israel. As if the transformation of their Master’s appearance — his clothing and himself shining bright as the sun — hadn’t been enough.

But even so, it still takes a while for Peter and the others to get the point. “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” There Peter is, like so many of us: overworking, overfunctioning, barely taking a second to stop, catch his breath and behold the wonder unfolding before his very eyes!

Some moments are simply meant to be savored for what they are, not preserved for posterity. Have you ever been at a tourist spot, when people are taking a lot of videos with their smartphones? So desperate are they to preserve what they’re seeing that they never even see it — not firsthand, anyway. Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, but only seeing it through that tiny screen — what

a waste! Come on, Peter, forget the lean-to shelters. Stop doing, for once. Just concentrate on being: on gratefully receiving the wonder that's before your eyes!

So, where are the mountaintops in our lives? Where do earthbound folk like you and me stand a better-than-average chance of encountering the living God?

No one, of course, can say for sure where God's going to show up — "The Spirit blows where it will," as Jesus taught Nicodemus. Yet even so, there are certain things we can do, to try to place ourselves in the right place at the right time. It's a good time to think about these things, on the threshold of Lent: because all of these things we can adopt, as part of our Lenten discipline.

For one thing, *we can pray*. I'm not talking, here, about the hurried grace before dinner, or the sleepy bedtime prayer, or the swift request beamed to God in a moment of confusion. The only way to truly ascend to the mountaintop, in prayer, is to practice the patient, contemplative kind of prayer. Such a prayer is more watchful waiting than conscious thought, more silence than speech. And yes, it does require a block of dedicated time.

Another way of ascending the mountain is to *read the Bible*. Again, I'm not talking here about dashing through it, reading it as you'd read some novel. No, there are ways of reading carefully-chosen passages devotionally: ways that allow

you or me, the reader, to brood over the text, to see what God the Holy Spirit is trying to say to us.

Still another way of opening ourselves to God's presence is by *coming regularly to worship*. Now that suggestion may sound crashingly obvious, but there's truth in it, all the same. You can't count on sensing the presence of the Lord every Sunday — but it does happen with some regularity. Why else would people come to church if it weren't for such a hope?

You know, some leading figures of the faith received their most cherished insight in a service of worship. I'm thinking, here, of the young Isaiah, who was worshiping in the Temple when he had that ecstatic vision of the angel holding the burning coal, and of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

I'm thinking, also, of John Wesley, founder of Methodism. He was a priest in the Church of England, who thought his spiritual life was just fine until he accepted an invitation to attend a worship service. In Wesley's own words:

"I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone

for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Through prayer, through scripture reading, through worship — ordinary spiritual disciplines — we too can ascend the mountain. We can open our hearts to whatever God is ready to do with us. Once again, let me emphasize that no spiritual seeker can summon the Holy Spirit at will: you can’t *make* yourself have a spiritual experience. Only God can see to that. Yet — to adapt an advertising slogan for one of the state lotteries to a more sacred purpose — “you can’t win if you don’t play.”

It’s always a sad thing when a mountain remains unclimbed: when, as with the New England farmer in Robert Frost’s poem, the mountain’s always there, looming up familiar and serene, but its summit never attempted. Is there a spring at the top, or isn’t there? Will the Lord appear, shining brightly as the sun — or, must the waiting continue? Who can know? But you can only find out for sure by climbing!

Russell Schweickart was an astronaut, who flew the lunar module for the Apollo 9 mission. Like many of his fellow astronauts, he discovered that his life

was changed by the experience of looking down at the Earth from outer space.

Here's what he said about it:

“Up there you go around every hour and a half; time after time, after time, and you wake up in the morning over the mid-East, and over North Africa. You look out of your window as you're eating breakfast — and there's the whole Mediterranean area, and Greece and Rome, and the Sinai and Israel. And you realize that what you're seeing in one glance was the whole history of [humanity] for centuries; the cradle of civilization. You go across the Atlantic Ocean, back across North Africa. You do it again and again. You identify with Houston, and then with Los Angeles, and Phoenix and New Orleans. The next thing you know, you are starting to identify with North Africa. You look forward to it. You anticipate it. And the whole process of what you identify with begins to shift.

When you go around it every hour and a half, you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing. And that makes a very powerful change inside of you. As you look down you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross — again and again. And you can't even see them. Still, you know there are thousands of people fighting over some imaginary lines down there that you can't even see, and you wish you could say, 'Look at that! Look at that! What's important?'"

So, what *is* truly important?" Is it the many tasks duties, the chores and errands and assignments, that fill our days with low-level noise? Or is it those “big-picture” kinds of moments, the rich intervals of stillness and of calm — the times of “being still and knowing that the Lord is God,” of sensing the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts?

We'll soon have an excellent opportunity to do just that: as we come to the table of the Lord. Most of us have been here, at the table, dozens — even hundreds — of times: but how many times have we *really* been here, heart, mind and will focused on the spiritual nourishment our Lord offers?

Beyond today — and this worship service — Lent will soon be upon us. Those forty days can be for us either a scarcely-noticed string of dates on the calendar, or they can be a time of true spiritual growth. The choice is up to each one of us. “It may not seem so much to climb a mountain you’ve worked around the foot of all your life,” as the poet says — but one thing’s for sure. If you don’t climb, you’ll never know the glories of the summit.

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