

Seeing the God of the Mountain in the Valley

Readings in Exodus and Mark 9:2-9

How ironic that on our walk through the Biblical landscape I should have chosen to encounter the *mountain*. As I may have mentioned before, I am terrified of heights. I could not bear to look down into the Grand Canyon through one of those see-through windows on a lookout point. I had to crawl away with my eyes closed. So undone was I that I couldn't even go into the gift shop. That's pretty strung out for me. Another time I climbed up to the top of a Mayan temple in Mexico, because I wanted to experience what an ancient priest might have felt in that elevated setting, human sacrifices aside. Then when I got to the top, I remembered my fear, and it took me an hour to muster the courage to try to get down – which I finally accomplished that in a most awkward manner, like a toddler who has not yet learned to walk. My husband Jim, who was waiting for me at the bottom, was a little, (no, a lot) impatient. So here I am – preaching about *mountains*.

Mountains – majestic, imposing, awesome, awe-inspiring – and terrifying for some of us when approached too closely.

Given this background, you can image how conflicted I am these days in talking to my son-in-law Paul as he prepares for a mountain climbing trip in Nepal. He described the exercise program he has been on to get ready, the diet, the equipment purchases, the yoga stretches, the spiritual gymnastics, the reading matter to be digested, the charts to be memorized. It's a lot. One does not go mountaineering unprepared – at least if one is smart and hopes to survive. Son-in-law Paul's story led me to John Krakauer's book *Into thin Air*, his account of climbing Mt Everest and the terrible disaster that took place there in 1996 when many died in a sudden blizzard. This prompted me to google about getting acclimatized so that one is not overcome by altitude sickness and other gory possibilities. I learned that the going advice is *climb high, sleep low* which means you don't head straight up the incline, but you go a little way and then return to a lower level to sleep before you repeat the process over the next few days, inching higher and higher in carefully orchestrated steps. It seems if you tried to go from the ground to the peak in a helicopter without any training, you wouldn't be able to breathe when you stepped out of the plane. The body has

to adjust in manifold ways, from increasing respiration, to changing the pH (acidity) of the blood, to radically boosting the number of oxygen-carrying red blood cells – a conversion that takes weeks to complete. So one does not attempt mountain climbing without thought, preparation, and perhaps prayer. It is strenuous work, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And no doubt it is life-changing.

As I contemplated about what it takes to climb a mountain, I noticed its spiritual counterpart in seeking to know God, the drawing of our whole person into union with God's energies and purposes. As one pastoral writer puts it:

The mountain ascent is a particularly apt symbol for the challenge of changing vistas, climate, and dangers that the soul is likely to face as our capacity for God is stretched.

There is no such thing as a simple ascent up a mountain - or an ascent into God's presence. Oh, it may start out easy enough, like setting off in the foothills with naïve excitement, but higher up it is harder, and the body and soul need to be challenged, stretched and strengthened for the journey to continue. We might think how wonderful it would be just get to the top of the mountain, to see God face-to-face. To have all our questions answered, all our doubts relieved, all our confusions laid to rest. But even Moses, God's most trusted and entrusted Old Testament prophet couldn't have borne the brilliance of God's glory. Yes, they had been talking up on Mount Sinai, he had heard God's voice, he had the tablets in his hands. Moses and God were in touch, you might say. But even given all that, Moses would have been blinded had he seen God directly, so God was gracious in covering Moses' eyes and only allowing the divine back (or to be more accurate, divine *backside*) to be seen. Yes, friends, some of the translations of God's body part mentioned in the Bible have been discrete saying *back* instead of *backside*, but the God of the Mountain (El Shaddai being an old name for Yahweh) was being more merciful than modest. To see God directly would be unbearable just as ascending to the peak without careful preparation would be dangerous, unbearable.

To see God, to know God, is a worthy goal, a noble desire; it is a righteous but daunting process. There is risk involved in spiritual transformation, in becoming at home with God. *The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed, and difficult to climb* (Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th C. bishop). How true, how true! It

seems reasonable to me to be scared of reaching so high. Reasonable to be awed – afraid - at the same time.

Coming out of the Zen Buddhist tradition, there are some amazing woodcuts called the Oxherding Pictures which delineate the stages of growth in a journey toward enlightenment, or as we would say, a journey toward God. These pictures indicate the struggle involved as a farmer seeks to find the wild ox which symbolizes Ultimate Reality. I wish you could see them, or maybe you can if you google Oxherding Pictures, but what is so graphic is how hard it is for the farmer to come into a harmonious relationship with the ox. They jost with one another for a long long time until at the end they become one creature with no divisions. But it doesn't come easily or quickly or smoothly.

Once in a great while an individual will have an unexpected, un-sought-after encounter with the Holy. It comes out of the blue, and knocks one for a loop. That's why we call it a *mountain top experience*. But this is not the most frequent, the most familiar way to come to know God more deeply. It's usually slower, and involves more effort and intentionality, and sometimes more pain.

So what will help the God-seeker survive the demands of the struggle up there on the mountain? How will the spiritual journey-er, like the mountain climber, train for the ascent?

It seems that there are some time-tested ways to prepare to meet God. They are called spiritual disciplines, which is rather off-putting, so let's think of them as exercises, as practices. It can be hard in our busy, noisy lives to carve out space for a vital relationship with God, or Life or Love or Reality, whatever name we give to that Cosmic Heartbeat at the center of life. Most of us aren't going to go off on a 40 day Ignatian retreat. Heck, we barely find time or privacy or focus to get through the basic prayers of the day – to say *help, thanks, sorry, and please*. But if we assumed the attitude of the mountain climber, and were willing to train for the climb, little by little, expecting to make some strides and then settle back down to acclimatize, wouldn't that seem a little bit more doable? What if we didn't expect to get to the top in one fell swoop, but were content to play around in the meadow for a while before chasing aggressively after the ox—how about noticing the flowers and the birds, having a picnic, taking a nap under a tree, becoming aware of God's presence and creativity. Then maybe some time later, we could try another more vigorous move, climb a little higher, add a few more steps in our ascent. Meditate on a verse in Scripture, be on the

lookout for touches of grace, feel love or compassion a little more strongly and act on it. Maybe it is not an all-out push to the top. Maybe it takes patience and waiting and longing and trusting and not measuring. Maybe it take practice...and prayer.

And remember, Moses had to come down from the mountain and deal with the Israelite people with all their gripes and keep the journey going toward the promised land. And the disciples had to come down from the mountain with its amazing revelations of Jesus all white and glowing, and that voice that spoke to them telling them to listen to the Beloved Son. They had to come down from the mountain and continue their mission work in the valley. And the Oxherding farmer, after wrestling endlessly with the ox before arriving at a harmonious relationship with the creature, returned “with helping hands” to ordinary life.

And we too, you and I, are called by the God of the Mountain to live in the valleys of daily life where we practice seeing God amidst trying times and difficult circumstances, seeing God in the faces of people we love and people who are our enemies, seeing God not in the rarified atmosphere of mystical experiences but in the tedious, boring routines as well as the happy moments of our human existence. As a book title by Jack Kornfield so wonderfully suggests, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*.

But maybe, hopefully, as we measure out the detergent, “shout out” the stains, smooth away the wrinkles, we will do so strengthened, empowered, gladdened by our trek up the mountain regardless of how far up we climbed. Maybe, hopefully, we will be able to deal with flawed presidential candidates, and Isis, and Baltimore and Dallas and Milwaukee, and skin color - and the laundry - with a deepened appreciation and trust in the God who can move mountains.

So let us go up to the mountain of the Lord who is in light inaccessible hid from our eyes. Let us go up!

May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess: First Congregational Church in Branford; 14 August 2016

Much insight and quotations gained from the July/August 2001 issue of *Weavings: The Mountain*.