
Mountains, Tablets, and a Whole Lot of Hiking

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Exodus 24-12-18

When I was working at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention I was invited on a trip to Annecy, France. It was to go with members of the Division of International Health to assist other countries in developing their own programs that would be similar to the Epidemiological Intelligence Service, or the EIS. These are the disease detectives of CDC that can be deployed at a moment's notice to identify public health concerns, respond in emergencies, or assist state health departments in outbreak situations.

It was a pretty amazing opportunity. I got to meet public health officials from around the world. I was doing work that seemed to be of a substantive nature. I felt like I was emerging from my role as a new policy analyst, to someone who had something important to bring to the table. And there are a lot worse places to go on a business trip than France.

On the flight home, I was feeling pretty good. Things were coming together and I was feeling a genuine excitement around my career in public health. I couldn't wait to get home and see my husband Ron and our two year old daughter, Rebecca. As I came soaring into the house, I could see that something had been up. Rebecca had been very sick while I had been up in the air, and while Ron had handled the whole thing beautifully, he looked a bit worn around the edges. And I just couldn't shake the feeling that my daughter had been sick, and I had not even known it.

I had struggled with how to balance my work life with my family since her birth. It is a balance that many of us still try to find. For whatever reason, that trip caused me to reevaluate what I was doing in that moment. I did not feel I had done something wrong by being away. And as I said, Ron had handled the situation and she was fine. But, there was something inside of me that said I wanted to shift priorities, at least for a time.

I ended up taking a leave of absence and had a year at home with her that was full of ordinary and wonderful moments. I had time to take her on picnics. To visit with Grandma and Grandpa in Michigan. To go to the Barnes and Noble for storytime. To sign up for Kindermusik classes together. It was a wonderful year.

While the trip to France could certainly be described as a mountain top experience, it is hard to say where the change really occurred. Was it in the thrill of the meetings where I thought I was making a real difference? Was it in the realization that I wanted more time with my daughter? Or was it in the many simple moments we shared in the next year?

When we think of mountain top experiences, we often think of pinnacles. Fleeting moments of grace or transfiguration where time and the world seems changed. Sometimes the experiences are so powerful that the whole focus of our life can shift. We can name them without much thought. The decision to commit our lives to someone we love. The birth of our children. The news of an unexpected diagnosis. The loss of a job. The achievement of a long term goal. But I wonder how many times when we have those moments that we remember all the time of waiting and hiking up and down the mountain that led to the briefer moment that we can name so easily?

The existentialist thinker Friedrich Nietzsche said, "In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak, but for that route you must have long legs." There can be a temptation in the spiritual journey to long for the peaks and miss the very hard work that our short legs have to accomplish to get us there.

Unless we spend a little time with Moses.

Moses has the gift of challenging many of our assumptions about just what it means to be a servant of the most high. Someone who can look on the face of God and live. He is one of those figures in the bible that seems to have moment after moment of assurance that God has a role for him to play. He gets burning bushes, parting seas, and invitation after invitation to ascend the mountain and be with God. There seems to be no lack of clarity about what he is called to do. The Lord speaks. He responds.

I admit it is a clarity I long for at times. I want to answer God's call in my life, but what that involves in the day to day is not always so obvious. I often joke that my life would be a lot easier if God would just leave a note on the kitchen counter in the morning, telling me what I was supposed to do next. I believe we have signs, our own burning bushes, but they do not always come upon us so clearly. But what I wonder is, did that clarity really make the journey any easier?

Even if Moses has more signs than average, he still spends a lot of time wandering and waiting. By the time we get to this morning's passage, Moses has already been on the mountain quite a bit. In Chapter 19 at God's invitation he goes up several times to receive warnings for the people of Israel. Sometimes when he goes by himself, he is told to go back down and bring Aaron along before finally receiving the Decalogue. Then he receives three or four more chapters of additional laws to pass along. And this is before the tablets have even been mentioned.

Then, just when he thinks it is time to seal the covenant by building an altar and flinging ritual blood around, he is told to take his deputies Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu for a climb. And they all are able to look on the Lord, and see him walking on what appears to be a street covered in sapphires. I am not making this up, I promise.

Then he is told to go up the mountain to get his note on the kitchen counter on behalf of everyone, the stone tablets. But again this is not a quick trip to revelation. There is a lot of waiting going on in this passage. He has told the elders to wait until he returns. He goes partway up the mountain with Joshua and they wait. And the waiting does not seem comfortable to me. He sees the presence of God descend for six days, which we are told looks like a devouring fire. Then the voice finally calls him and he goes to hear what God has to say. Then he was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Well, at least he could count on the people of Israel to spend their time well. They were probably in prayer the whole time, fasting and preparing for his return. Not. Remember the golden calf? While Moses is up on the mountain receiving unbelievably detailed instructions about how to build the ark of the covenant, they have fallen into idolatry and gone astray. This journey to receive the tablets will end with him smashing them on the ground.

If the shortest way in the mountains is from peak to peak, I have to wonder whether Moses started wishing he had longer legs at some point in his sojourn with the people of Israel. Clearly his experience of the presence of God did not make his life one of leisure or lacking in struggle. He doesn't even get to go to the promised land at the end of it all.



So, what can Moses teach us? I think what the story of Moses' transfiguration points us towards is that most of our spiritual moments are not mountain top experiences. Most of our time is spent going up and down the mountains. We have glimpses and they can change the course of our lives. But the glimpses are just a piece of the terrain of the spiritual life. I wonder if that is why Jesus tells Peter, James, and John to not mention their moment on the mountain. He does not want that moment confused with the nitty gritty of responding to those who will need healing and the road to Jerusalem.

Mountain top moments are just that, moments. They are powerful, they can speak an intention that forms us in central ways. When we baptize these children, we are stating an intention for how we want their lives to be formed in Christian community. But there is much that will take place after this ceremony to make that reality. And that is why each of us, parents, godparents, and the assembled community have taken vows today. Because it is in the living out of the moment that we are truly transfigured.

Amen