
Stuck on a Mountain

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Last Epiphany – Year C

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 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 and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” Luke 9:28–35

I remember a mountain I once climbed, about twenty-five years ago. Back then, I was part of a small band of men, all of us hikers and backpackers, whose habit was to take a long off-trail backpacking trip, every year.

Every summer, we would pack up our boots and equipment, our tents and our gear, and head out west. We thrived on daring ourselves, hiking off the trails as much as possible, discovering new cliffs and canyons. We deliberately went off the more established trails and used topographical maps to follow ridges and mountaintops. It was our goal each year to hike along some part of the western continental divide, along the very top of mountain lines, with spectacular views and long vistas.

We were careful; but, as you can imagine, we did some dangerous things. We laughed a lot, and we fell a lot. We ached a lot, and we got scraped up a lot. We got tired a lot. In tight fixes, we prayed a lot! We saw our bodies transformed by bruises and cuts and blisters. We saw our faces, veiled by beards, transformed by the sheer beauty of God. In those transformations, we found each other. And we grew to love each other, too.

We called each other, “Captain.” I was Captain Sam, and our general leader was Captain Billy—at least he was the most experienced. Captain Bobby was a doctor, and he always had good supplies of painkillers. Captain Jim was with us, and Captain Lyles, and Captain Edward.

One fine day found us in quite a fix. We were climbing to the top, scrambling up scree and fallen rock, and then literally pulling ourselves up a rather vertical cliff, with our backpacks on. Now, ever since I was young, I have enjoyed climbing, starting with trees. I have often found myself in the tops of trees with no idea how to get back down.

On that day, however, it was Captain Bobby who found himself stuck. At least he said he was stuck. He had somehow managed to maneuver his body, halfway up a cliff, so that he could not figure out how to get further up, but he couldn’t figure out how to get back down either.

And so he called out to us, “I’m stuck.” “What do you mean?” we asked. “I am stuck,” he repeated, “I can’t go up and I can’t go down. I’ve got to stay right here.” Some of us were above him; we looked down, and, yes, he looked stuck. Some of us were below him, including Captain Billy. And so we all stopped, trying to figure out what to do. It was impossible for any one of us to go get him. We were all stuck.

It was Captain Billy who hollered the words that I will always remember. They rang through that huge mountain range and they ring through my ears even today. “You’re NEVER stuck!” “You’re never stuck,” he said. Then, he hollered out something else, in mountain words, that, loosely translated, would be, “Move on!”

“You’re never stuck.” After a while, after some quiet, after a pause, after some time to get his head back together, Captain Bobby did, indeed, find a way to move on. And we all found a way to move on. We were not stuck after all. It was rather like a miracle. It was a transformation.

One day two thousand years ago, Captain Jesus took a band of his disciples up on a mountain, too. He took Captain Peter and Captain James and Captain John. We don’t know what exactly happened up there. The gospel writer Luke says they were tired and sleepy. But apparently, in that dreamlike state, with such amazing vistas, they saw Jesus with two great figures of their religious history. Jesus was with Moses and Elijah, the two great symbols of the Law and the Prophets. They saw the old law and prophets being transformed into a new person. They found themselves.

The scene was so incredible, and so beautiful, and yet so confusing and confounding, that they got stuck. Maybe they were just too tired to go anywhere. Maybe they were too mesmerized to go anywhere. Maybe the sheer beauty of the transformation before them stopped them. But they got stuck.

And so Captain Peter said, “Let’s just stay right here. Let’s take off our backpacks and set up three tents, three dwellings, for each of these incredible visions.” I imagine that Captain James and Captain John loved that idea, too. Maybe they were too tired to go further anyway.

And then a voice rang out. Maybe it was from those huge mountain clouds, like thunder, or maybe it was just that amazing voice of Captain Jesus. “You’re not stuck! Move on!”

These days, I have times when I don’t have the energy to go further. I don’t really want to go backward, but I don’t want to go forward, either. I have days when I am just tired of all the scrapes and aches all over my body, all over my soul! There are days when I am stuck.

There are also days when the weather is so perfect, and the mountaintop view is so spectacular, that I don’t feel the need to go anywhere. Those days feel more positive, but I realize I can be just as stuck in those days, too.

No matter how experienced a climber we are in this life, no matter what band of sisters or brothers we are in, there are days when we are stuck. Sometimes we know we’re stuck, and we cry out for help. Sometimes we don’t know we’re stuck. We think we are just stopping to unpack our tents.

But no matter where we are on our journey through the mountains of life, and through the valleys of life— no matter how many aches and wounds have transformed us—there comes a voice to us. That voice is strong and loving, and that voice is ultimately transforming and grace-giving.

“You’re never stuck!” the graceful voice of God says. That voice will speak to these young children about to be baptized today, when they feel confounded and confused on their life journeys. “You’re not stuck,” the voice will say. That voice will often be coming from us, their parents and their captains and their community. “Come with me,” the voice will say, “Move on, move together with me.”

The movement of transformation is always towards grace. On the mountain or in the valley, we are a grace-formed people. Grace is meant to release us, to release us into men and women of courage and love. It is grace that says, “You’re never stuck; move on!”

Then, in the midst of aches and scrapes and bruises and cuts, and in the midst of fatigue and despair and paralyzing confusion, in some incomprehensible moment of grace, we do move. We move, on the delightful wings of angels, transformed, and into the life of Jesus our Lord.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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