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## *Mountaintop Moments*

**A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder**  
**Proper 7 – Year C**

It's interesting how you can read the same story over and over again and notice something different each time. OK perhaps that's not always true. There are certain children's books on repeat in our home that I'm beyond bored with after reading them on a seemingly endless loop. But there is no book I read more often than the Bible, and yet something different unfolds each time I visit it for prayer, for preaching, for a pastoral visit—it's has proved true to me again and again that Holy Scripture is living and active.

I just returned from a visit to my original hometown, Lubbock, Texas, where I was visiting my maternal grandfather—who is recovering from a spinal infection, and my paternal grandmother—who celebrates her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday today. Bringing my two young children along so my grandparents could see how their great grandchildren's personalities are forming was especially fun.

My last night in Lubbock, I had dinner with an aunt and some cousins. One cousin had just returned from Camp Ceta Canyon—a camp four generations of my family have attended.

I love camp. There is just something so magical about camp—no matter where it is. I have attended or worked at no less than seven camps in my lifetime, spanning four states and two continents, and all of them are magical. Something about the lack of air conditioning, the sheer brightness of the stars, the sense of belonging that comes with all the camp traditions, the night sounds, the morning bugle—whether it's at the canyon, in the hill country, in the mountains... on a lake or a river or the coast... camp is full of what many of us know as “mountaintop moments.” Those thin spaces where God feels so close, it's as if you could reach out and touch the cloak of Jesus.

But those mountaintop moments don't last. If they did, they wouldn't be mountaintops at all—just everyday life. Instead, we have to return to reality, return to the grind, return to the drama—whatever it is that makes us feel more distant from God's presence in this world.

I think of that when looking at our Gospel today. A man is tortured by demons—chained to the sarcophaguses that would have lined the streets on the outskirts of town—a slave to that which possesses him against his will. His suffering is long and hard. Until Jesus heals him. Talk about a mountaintop moment! Not for the pigs who ran off the cliff, or for the farmer who lost what I believe amounts to a million-dollar swine herd that day—but to the man who regained his life? His true self? His ability to think and speak for himself? Mountaintop moment for sure.

And so the townspeople all run out of the city gates to see what has happened, and they find the man, sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind. Blessed are the days we get to sit at the feet of Jesus in our right mind. And the man begs Jesus to let him stay with him—to travel with Jesus, to stay near him always. But Jesus sends him away.

Oh, I feel for that man. I know the text says that he went away, proclaiming to all he encountered how much Jesus had done for him—and I'm sure that's true! Jesus had done so much! The most! But still. To be at the feet of Jesus, in your right mind, to beg to stay there forever, only to be sent away. Even with all this man has been given, I still believe I would have felt crushed in that moment if it were me.

And so, I turn to today's Psalm. For me, it too is a mountaintop text. It's one of my favorite camp songs! And yet as many times as I've sung it, I've never really considered it a psalm of lament before now. I've always read the first line, started singing the familiar tune in my head, and then missed the beautiful struggle that follows.

"As the deer longs for the water, so my soul longs for you, oh God." Another translation says, "my whole being craves you." Why didn't it occur to me sooner that longing for something, craving something, usually implies a keen sense of absence. The psalmist writes: "My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long they say to me, "Where now is your God?" Where now IS your God?"

He continues by asking himself, "Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?" Another translation puts it this way, "Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside?" This psalm I've always thought of as a "mountaintop" song is a song of lament! And yet he reminds himself in the very next line: "Put your trust in God/Hope is in God." Because lament and hope are not in contradiction to each other. Indeed, they often go hand in hand.

For me, this week, that is the takeaway of both the Gospel and the Psalm: That whether we are possessed by outside influences, or free to be our authentic selves; whether we sit at the feet of Jesus, or are sent away; we belong in God's story. That there is room for depression, sadness and heaviness in God's story—just as there is room for hopefulness, healing, thanksgiving, and song! There is room for it all in God's story—and there is room for it all at this table. It all belongs—YOU belong. And God is faithful.