

Mountaintop

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Mountaintop.

In movies or television, mountaintop moments can be glorious. Have you seen one of these scenes? For example, the documentary chronicling a climber as she summits a mountain. The camera then pans out from the climber to behold peaks enshrouded with clouds as far as your eyes can see. It is a heady moment, a barrage of your senses.

In that quintessential mountaintop moment a feeling of wonder, a sense of clarity as well with this perspective. Some or all of these experiences give power to the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments atop God's Holy Mountain. The storyteller describes the faithful left at the base of the mountain gazing up at the journey of Moses with fear and trembling: *Surely Moses will not be able to fully encounter Yahweh and live!* As he climbs, we recall God beckoning Moses to challenge Pharaoh, to lead God's children, the Israelites, out of slavery. Moses was not completely sold on that mission at first. Imagine the senses tingling in Moses as he scales that mountain, a-swirl in fear and wonder.

Maybe a few of you have found yourselves on a mountaintop; whether during a ski trip, or mountain climbing. I have been on pretty lofty hills in my lifetime, never literally a mountaintop. But from these stories of Moses on his holy mountaintop, and from the transfiguration moment of Peter, James and John on theirs; can we take something metaphorical from their experiences that we can relate to? Were there lofty moments in your life where you encountered wonder, or an experience of something so mysterious or beautiful and sacred that you *knew* that we are not alone in the universe; that there is something greater than all of us? These mountaintop experiences assure us that there is a Creator who is with us as we face challenge and tragedy, and who offers a vision to counter all the absurd and frustrating political realities that we see around us.

Mountaintop experiences, at least these biblical ones, put life and all its challenges as well as possibilities in perspective. Can't we all resonate with poor Peter in the Transfiguration story? There they are, Jesus has led his friends up to the mountaintop, and he is transfigured – bathed in wondrous light – while two figures appear with Jesus, the disciples' heroes of the Jewish faith, Moses and Elijah. We are right there. Right there!

Instead of just being in the moment, though, and accepting the grace of it all, Peter talks through the wondrous experience. His inclination is to *do* something, rather than just taking it all in. Typical human, his instinct is to build a tent, some kind structure to hold this moment, contain it. That seems to be a universal instinct that we humans have, isn't it? We build giant, glorious tents to honour our awe-inspiring God. Grand structures to contain our communities, Christian cathedrals. To be fair, when I enter those Cathedrals, I am often "lifted" to what can feel like a mountaintop experience as we behold giant stained glass and the grand architecture. And, as we hear the sublime, sacred music that our esteemed music director plays and leads with our gifted choir, we

can be lifted to that mountaintop. You don't have to summit Mount Everest to have a mountaintop experience.

To be honest, scholars have struggled to find any truly lofty mountains that might fit the geography of these biblical stories. Instead, it is suggested, that Zion, God's holy mountain of the Hebrew Scriptures and the "mountain" where Jesus was transfigured, were mythological. There could have been a very big hill, but it was a place where people encountered the living God.

Storytellers like to be dramatic, and even have been known to embellish. Have you any storytellers in your family who garnish their stories? One of my favourite movies was *The Englishman who went up a hill but came down a mountain*.¹ It was set in a time near the end of World War 1. Cartographers are sent to verify the height of what was reputed to be the "first mountain in Wales" by locals. When that mountain is measured at less than the requisite 1000 feet for official recognition as more than a hill, villagers are up in arms. The young cartographer comes to appreciate the power of symbol to define a community. Sometimes literal truth robs life of wonder.

Mountaintop moments connect us with wonder and allow us space to put life and all its struggle in perspective. We want to stay in that extraordinary, sacred space. But that is not the end of the story. After Yahweh gives Moses an extensive set of instructions to go along with the Ten Commandments, Moses descends the mountain to find the people not at all waiting expectantly, but they, in Moses' long absence, they have created a golden calf. They have utterly disappointed their God. The wonder of the mountaintop has given way to real life – its disappointments and frustrations that Moses must now cope with.

After the mountaintop experience of Peter, James and John, having witnessed the wonder of Jesus transfigured in light, they cannot stay on that mountaintop. They must descend back into real life down below. Immediately after this transfiguration story in Matthew's Gospel we and those disciples encounter a desperate father begging Jesus to heal his epileptic son. Life goes on; frustrating, frightening, and often perplexing.

We cannot stay up on that mountaintop; those sacred moments, our quiet prayer time that we muscle into our mornings before entering the fray of life. We come to worship on Sunday seeking perspective whether it's a powerfully familiar hymn melody or phrase, or a prayer that gives comfort, or a moment of inspiration coming from words spoken or powerful silence – whatever sacred moment in worship we might be blessed with, we cannot stay there. There is nothing we can say or build that will ever do justice to a mountaintop experience. We can only experience it, give thanks for it. Then we take that wonder, that perspective with us as we enter the chaos, the frustration, the adventure of our everyday lives.

But remember this. If we are impacted by the mountaintop moment, we are forever transformed by it. We take something – perspective, inspiration, affirmation of faith. Moses and those disciples who really, to be honest, they didn't really think they were up to the task God put before them. But after these sacred moments, we know that we are

¹ *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112966/> 1994, Pinewood Studios.

not alone, regardless of what trials and tribulations await us. We know that God calls each of us (remember that Moses and those disciples of Jesus all were ordinary, everyday people like you and I). Our Creator plants us on this earth like seeds, and, with mountaintop moments that refresh our roots, we grow and do extraordinary things when we connect with our Creator.

Faith does that – it assures us, and we don't need to prove or account for this to anyone else. We just know it. We are connected to the Source of Life, and we are connected to community.

My friends, we cannot accomplish things way up there on a mountaintop. It is when we come down from the mountain that the real work of God through us happens. We descend the mountain into places of grief – whether a friend or family member, all we can do is sit with them, listen to their pain. The mountaintop moment reminded Peter that God's power is the source, we can do nothing without first recognizing the source of our power. Peter learned the power of presence, just being, even as he wanted to make grand gestures to do justice to his experience.

Mountaintop moments remind us that we are not alone, and that when we descend, we enter again everyday life. We are called to try to understand this strange "kingdom of God" vision that the Bible teaches – a place where the lost, the ostracized, those who feel forgotten or left behind – ALL God's children! – are guided back into a radical model of community. It is a diverse community, to be God's children, and with no pre-conditions to become a part. That is radical when you think of all the fine print and hard-to-see conditions we find in life.

Perhaps the most famous mountaintop moment, a vision shared by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.²

Dr. King was assassinated the next day. Coming down from the mountaintop is never easy, my friends.

Let us be about aspiring to God's Vision for this St. Andrew's community, a Vision that we see glimpses of each Sunday in worship. *Can we model God's kin-dom vision here?* Let us together create community that welcomes the despised, offers sanctuary to all who face peril and a sense of belonging to all. Amen.

² Dr King's "I have been to the Mountaintop" speech can be found @ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>