



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Mountaintop and flatlands

Luke 9.28–36

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Once upon a time, there were two English map makers who arrived at a Welsh village, where their assignment was to measure the town's mountain. They were methodical and meticulous, as they should be, in their calculations, only to arrive at the conclusion, much to the dismay of the village folks, that indeed their mountain fell short, literally, of the qualifications to be categorized as a mountain. Alas, it was but a hill, 16 feet short of the necessary height.

The locals were crushed, as they bargained with the map makers to proclaim it a mountain.

"But to us, it is a mountain," they argued convincingly.

To which they were answered, "Ahhh, but it's not truly a mountain...is it now?"

And that is how the people did absolutely the only thing they could at that point. Bucket by bucket, day after day, they hauled dirt up the hill, to aid the effort for that hill to achieve mountain status. And finally, they did it—they no longer had a hill, but the village truly had a legitimate mountain. Their grand efforts were rewarded and there was great celebration in the land!¹

Why, we might ask, would a village go to these lengths for 16 feet of dirt? Because...they knew mountains are magical. Hills, on the other hand, are a part of everyday living. But mountains, when you reach the top, help you to see the world in a whole new way. There's something about mountaintops.

The biblical writers knew it, too. When big things happen in scripture, there's often a mountain involved. Mountains were traditional sites for encounters with God. After the

¹*The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain*, 1995, Miramax.

2 flood, the Ark is thought to have left Noah and crew on top of Mount Ararat. Moses went up a mountain, known as Mt. Horeb or Sinai, and came back down with ten tablets of stone—what we know as the Ten Commandments. Then, at the end of his life, he scaled Mt. Nebo to get a glimpse of the promised land. It was again on Mount Sinai that God appeared to the prophet Elijah as recorded in the book of I Kings, and he went on to turn people’s hearts back to the covenant they had made with God. Indeed, big things happen on mountains.

Our scripture reading for today is no different. Hear these words from the Gospel according to Luke:

...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!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

This story is known as the transfiguration, or metamorphoses, as it is better translated from the Greek...

Jesus took his inner circle, the disciples with whom he was the closest, Peter, James and John, and they climbed a

mountain. The fact that he limited the group to three, and that he didn't take all 12 disciples, emphasizes the importance of this event. Big things happen on mountains.

And something big did happen. While he was praying, Jesus' countenance changed—his face somehow looked different. And his clothes glowed, sparkling like they had been bleached. Then both Moses and Elijah, ghosts from the past, appeared, and they talked with Jesus. Strangely, during all of this, the disciples were so sleepy that they were nodding off. Who knows...maybe the altitude was getting to them. But at some point, they must have realized that something big indeed was happening because they snapped to. And Peter, gotta love him, blurted out the first thing that came to mind, as he so often did. "This is awesome...let's do something...let's camp out. Let's pitch three tents—one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Peter knew that this was big. After all, Jesus was glowing and hanging out with the heroes of the faith who had been dead for centuries. Here were the forefathers of the Jewish people. Peter wanted to make this mountaintop experience last as long as it could. Big things happen on mountains.

And then, the really big thing happened. A cloud descended mysteriously on them all. And a voice called out, "This is my Son, the Chosen, my Beloved. Listen to him." And then, as fast as it came, the cloud lifted, and it was just the four of them again—Peter, James, John, and Jesus. And it was over with little time to bask in the glow—scripture tells us they came down from the mountain the very next day.

When we experience the mystery of the mountaintop, when we see things in a whole new way, sometimes we want them to last forever. But mountaintop experiences generally have a short shelf life. They can be intense experiences—we couldn't function there forever. And we are reminded

4 that the mountaintop high doesn't last forever because there is real-life work to be done down in the flatlands. After the men came down from the mountain, Jesus engaged in work the very next day—healing the boy with the unclean spirit. As wonderful as it was, Jesus took his disciples down off the mountain to the flatland where human need is found and where duty calls. And that is where they were called and that is where we are called. It is only as we take up the metaphorical basin and towel and return to the flatlands, that we find we have been renewed with hope and courage inspired by what we have seen and heard and felt on the mountaintop.

Big things happen on mountains. Mountaintop experiences are amazing—they strengthen us on our journey into meaningful connection with God and with others. Imagine the effect that the transfiguration had on Peter, James and John—they re-entered the flatlands—invigorated, inspired and ready to serve. Moments of spiritual intimacy with God are a source of spiritual solace that makes us even more available to God's purposes. Strengthened by both the reality and the gift in such moments, we find ourselves freed to live in deeper love and connection with God and with others. If we are attentive, we also find ourselves asking God to tell us what the gift of that experience might say to us about the next steps on the journey ahead.

And so, these past couple of days, I've been thinking about, even wrestling with two thoughts, upon our return from the Rocky Mountains. First, what are those mountaintop experiences to which I and we can avail ourselves, that help to strengthen and inspire and even super-charge our faith?

A few weeks ago, we heard the reports of our delegates to Annual Conference. Both Naomi and Nancy reported the power of the gathered body in worship—over a thousand Brethren joining voices in four-part harmony, inviting the

Spirit to “move in our midst.” That was a mountaintop experience as we sang together. It is one that draws us closer to God and one another. As pastors, it is our hope that each Sunday, as we gather together here for worship, as we come expectantly, God will be encountered by each person in some way. And the glory of that encounter can carry us into the flatlands of the week ahead.

As we as a congregation have been discerning the needs of this physical plant and the possibilities of renovation and expansion, the pastors have been charged by leadership to consider some new ways that we can especially attend to our spiritual renovation and expansion. What are those mountaintop experiences, maybe even mini-mountaintops, that have the potential to super-charge our faith and strengthen this community as faithful followers of Jesus’ way in the days and months and years ahead in tandem with a building project? We are giving that thoughtful and prayerful attention to how it might be done.

And, second thing that I’ve been contemplating, as our youth return from NYC, how can we walk with them and encourage them as they return to the flatlands? How can we affirm their experiences and also importantly, how can we learn from them? Something very special happened in Colorado at NYC. Our youth not only hiked the Rockies, they encountered God in a very real way on the mountaintop. And they heard the voice in the cover of cloud say clearly, *“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”* They are ready to listen to Jesus and enter the hard work of the flatlands, the hard work of love. And we have the privilege and the responsibility to walk alongside:

- to help them process their experiences
- to encourage them to live out their faith

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- to include them and to involve them on this Jesus' journey
- to learn from them what a super-charged faith might look like in this day and age...

because big things happen on mountains.

The story about the village who made their hill into a mountain doesn't end there. Over the years, the mountain was measured again. Alas, after decades of settling, the mountain was, once again, just a hill. And the village folks took up their buckets again, and day after day, they worked to recreate the mountain. Because they knew that even though, like Peter, James and John, they couldn't stay up there, the mountaintop holds almost a kind of magic, to see the world in a whole new way, to prepare us, and to equip us to live in the flatlands below. That is the hard work of love. God's love. May it be so.

