

**Mark 9:2-9**

We set out early one morning, just before sunrise. It's cool and slightly misty as we leave the walls of the compound behind and begin to pick our way through thickets of wild brambles. A lot of trial and error as each of us try different paths into the thicket only to eventually be turned back, reach a dead end. There's just the three of us so it takes a while – during which I can hear the jackals yipping back and forth; eerie, disembodied cries shrouded in the mist and weak light.

But we finally happen upon a path through the brambles; and give thanks for the ubiquitous goat flocks who will eat their way through anything, even thorny entanglements. We follow the goat path through a small mango orchard, passing small houses, unstimulating but for the dogs who look up at us curiously, give a few cursory barks and lay back down. We cross a paved road and begin to climb, again following goat paths. Below we can see the small village and few shepherds are moving their flocks out onto the various hillside paths – making their way up same as us.

“It would be useful to have a map,” I find myself thinking on more than one occasion. Clearly the goats are not troubled by this concept as their paths meander all over the hillside – seldom in any consistent direction. So we end up doing a lot of broken ground scrambling up the loose side of the mountain. And for a while that's just all we're thinking about; climb, slide, re-climb, slide – scamper, grab, slide; check the progress and start anew. We are grateful to eventually make our way around to the north face of the mountain and a tree line. But up here the mist is thick and it's hard to see more than a few yards in any direction. We continue up the mountain encountering ruins of large rock walls, then foundations, overgrown – dark, large blocks of limestone still standing guard with the trees as their sentries. And we make another steep ascent before cresting the top. Which comes as something of a surprise when you can't see far enough ahead to know the end is in reach.

More ruins around us on the wide summit, and a few small gardens and orchards we can just make out to the right and left of us as we discover we're ...standing in the middle of a road – to where? Unsure, we follow it to the East. I'm not sure at what point we began to be aware of them, but the voices of men chanting or singing what I suppose were morning prayers

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came and went in waves as we continue along. Latin, Greek, something ancient and unintelligible, it unnerved us a little.

And then the mist parted and the sun burned through and directly in front of us was a high stone wall and iron gate, behind which rose a towering stone basilica. All in startling relief, so bright, so clear and yet ethereal – but only for an instant, and then the mist folded back in and we had only the memory of it.

Looking for the words to communicate the awe and gravity of the moment to my friends, another beat me to it, “Dudes, no one is ever going to believe this – this is like, mystical.” Which he quickly followed with the caveat, “but those voices are weirdin’ me out, maybe we should take off.” Which we were only too happy to acquiesce to, making our way quickly back down the mountainside and back to the compound, talking in snatches of thought about the experience, not knowing quite what to make of it.

So I can identify a little with where Peter’s coming from; in fact I’ll even give him some props for being braver than me and my friends.

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here,” he says. Translation, “it’s really neat that you brought us up here, a real honor, but this is freakin’ us out!”

And beyond the obvious, why are Peter and the others so terrified? Why does he offer to build the three dwellings?

The answer is in the previous chapter:

*8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “but who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”*

Peter thinks Jesus is the Messiah. So when Moses shows up and then Elijah we have the recipe for full-on apocalypse. Moses symbolizes the covenant according to the Law; Elijah the promise from the prophets, of hope beyond the Law; Jesus is that hope embodied, the Messiah. Peter thinks this is it – the end of the world and he’s got a front-row seat! You’d be terrified too! But Peter’s also hopeful – that’s what the dwellings are about. Peter thinks that the kingdom of heaven has come and Jesus will be ruling from the top of this mountain with Elijah and Moses at his side. Peter doesn’t realize this

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isn't the end; there's still more climbing to do – but the mists have folded back in, the cloud has overshadowed them. From here they will have to descend into the valley to continue the more arduous climb to Jerusalem, and ultimately up to Golgotha.

Jesus will approach Jerusalem and the cross revealing more and more of himself and God's will in a series of teaching vignettes – follow-up mountaintop experiences, moments of clarity, epiphanies for the crowds and disciples – only to have the mists close in again and again. The disciples all too often miss the key points in Jesus' teaching and fail to grasp who he is; and thus what it is they are called to become.

Ever had a mountaintop experience yourself? A moment of clarity, of inspiring vision, a sense of purpose and peace? A time where God's greatness is manifest as well as his love for you?

Exodus 34:29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining and they were afraid to come near him.

Man you come down from that mountaintop experience a changed person – it's like your face is shining just like Moses. Maybe your friends react like Aaron, 'Holy cow, Steve went away on this retreat or to this conference and when he came back he had all these crazy new ideas – and he's excited about them – watch out!'

Yes, yes, we've all felt that excitement, that possibility of greatness – then what happens? Right, we have to live in the valley, we have to come down off the mountain. And life in the valley is hard. On our way down from the mountaintop we look out and see, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

*...we see that we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promised land of freedom. Yes, we have left the dusty soils of Egypt, and we have crossed a Red Sea that had for years been hardened by a long and piercing winter of massive resistance, but before we reach the majestic shores of the promised land, there will still be gigantic mountains of opposition ahead and prodigious hilltops of injustice. (Yes, That's right) We still need some*

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*Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand. Yes, we need a chart; we need a compass; indeed, we need some North Star to guide us into a future shrouded with impenetrable uncertainties.*

That's Abraham coming down off the mountain with Isaac; that's the people of Israel following Moses in the wilderness; that's Peter and the disciples following Jesus into the Passion; and that's us too, as we begin climbing through the introspection and disciplines of Lent. Make no mistake, Lent is about refinding the North Star to guide you through life. About climbing a mountain to be removed from the concerns of everyday through sacrifice, effort and discipline – to seek God out on the mountaintop rather than in the valleys we've become accustomed to, the goat paths we've become lost on, the thickets we've become entangled in. And it's about proclaiming that mountaintop experience in word and deed because,

*It's all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism, but ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here and His children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do. "Darker yet may be the night, harder yet may be the fight. Just stand up for that which is right." It seems that I can hear a voice speaking even this morning, saying to all of us, "Stand up for what is right. Stand up for what is just. Lo, I will be with you even until the end of the world." Yes, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I've felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. And I go on in believing that. Reach out and find the breadth of life.*

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*You may not be able to define God in philosophical terms. Men through the ages have tried to talk about him. (Yes) Plato said that he was the Architectonic Good. Aristotle called him the Unmoved Mover. Hegel called him the Absolute Whole. Then there was a man named Paul Tillich who called him Being-Itself. We don't need to know all of these high-sounding terms. (Yes) Maybe we have to know him and discover him another way. (Oh yeah) One day you ought to rise up and say, "I know him because he's a lily of the valley." (Yes) He's a bright and morning star. (Yes) He's a rose of Sharon. He's a battle -axe in the time of Babylon. (Yes) And then somewhere you ought to just reach out and say, "He's my everything. He's my mother and my father. He's my sister and my brother. He's a friend to the friendless." This is the God of the universe. And if you believe in him and worship him, something will happen in your life. You will smile when others around you are crying. This is the power of God.*

Good words, strong words to call us out of complacency and onward in the climb through Lent, through life.

Take this time, these forty days to hear, really hear the word of the Lord, and begin to unpack its meaning for your life, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Sometimes you've got to climb a mountain to be able to say that,

*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; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

Amen.