

## **FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE DESERT: “What God wants us to learn from the Journey called Life!”**

Last week was a great blessing for me. I got to spend a few glorious days in the beloved Black Hills of SD. It is no secret to me why the Lakota's consider them sacred, so do I! They are beautiful and so accessible. I was there leading a conference camp, and got to spend a couple extra days doing some of the things I love to do; hiking, golfing, and mountain biking. One afternoon I discovered the old flume trail above Storm Mountain Center, and I rode it all the way to Rockerville. The flume trail was built in the 1880's to move water from Sheridan Lake to Rockerville, to assist in the gold mining process flooding the hills at that time.

On this trail was built a 4 foot by 4 foot wooden trough through which the water meandered the 17 miles from Sheridan Lake to the wooden “Rockers” stationed in the mining camp that later became Rockerville. A young boy was hired to walk the trough one way each day and stuff the holes with manure or rags to keep the water flowing. It was on that trail of still visible boards, square nails, and layered level rock buildups, that I spend a couple wonderful hours. At one point, while I was resting, the clouds parted revealing a beautiful setting sun; I wished I had my tent. I thought of how cool it would be to spend a night right there surrounded by all that history, and beauty. I thought better of it as it started raining, and made my way back to the camp.

Today our text tells a similar story. I know you have heard it, but hear it again, maybe for the first time, and then we'll talk about the mountain experiences of our lives!

*<sup>28</sup>About eight days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup>And as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup>Then two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking with Jesus. <sup>31</sup>They were glorious to see. And they were speaking of how he was about to fulfill God's plan by dying in Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup>Peter and the others were very drowsy and had fallen asleep. Now they woke up and saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with him.*

*<sup>33</sup>As Moses and Elijah were starting to leave, Peter, not even knowing what he was saying, blurted out, "Master, this is wonderful! We will make three shrines - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>34</sup>But even as he was saying this, a cloud came over them; and terror gripped them as it covered them. <sup>35</sup>Then a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, my Chosen One, Listen to him." <sup>36</sup>When the voice died away, Jesus was there alone. They didn't tell anyone what they had seen until long after this happened. <sup>37</sup>The next day, after they had come down the mountain, a huge crowd met Jesus. Luke 9: 28-37*

I know that all of us can scan the horizon's past in our lives, and see some mountain top experiences. They may have been religious or spiritual events, even revivals. They may have involved exotic travels, or simple family gatherings. They may include far away places, or simple glimmers of northern lights. Whatever you name them, and wherever you experience them; each of us has been blessed by God to experience some mountain events in life, and if the truth were told, we'd like to build a tent, or at least take a picture...but there is more we must learn, and that is our task today. What lessons about life would God have us learn from the mountain top experiences of our lives? Here are 4 that I discovered in this great Bible Story.

#### 1. GOD USES THE MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCES OF LIFE TO **INSPIRE** US

Is it really any wonder that Paul in Romans cites the fact that all that can be known about God is plainly revealed through the things He has created? When one stands on the Mountain, literally or figuratively, it's easy to believe God had a hand in the beauty surrounding us in creation. Whether your thing is sunsets over the badlands, fading ripples on your favorite fishing lake, the dewy beauty of early morning greens, or the precipice of your private Pikes Peak, God's handiwork is clearly seen in the things of nature God has made. If you are looking!

Sometimes the 'drudgery of the daily' dims our focus. Our outlook on life is inflicted with cataracts and we have trouble seeing the beauty around us. Our business and self importance cloud our ability to look up and look around, even look within and see that beauty is one of those attributes of God we see/learn/experience in nature and creation.

That's one reason the mountains are so important to us; they inspire us. Peter was overwhelmed at the site on the mountain of Jesus, bleached white, having a latte with Moses (who had been dead some 3000 years) and Elijah (who had been dead some 2000 years himself). That would be a bit overwhelming, wouldn't it? Peter can't be faulted for his overreaction, who of us wouldn't over react in such company?

Whatever your 'mountain top' experience, know first, that God draws us to the 'mountain' to inspire us.

## 2. GOD USES THE MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCES OF LIFE TO **RENEW** US

Think about our text again...what were Peter and James and John doing while Jesus was discussing his death with those long dead friends of his? Yes, they were taking a nap! How unspiritual...or is it. You know the older I get the more I'm coming to believe that the most spiritual thing you can do when you are tired...is to sleep! I have mentioned it before that there is a difference between being tired and being weary. When you are tired, you must rest, sleep, nap if you will. But when you are weary, which is more a condition of the soul than of the body, you must do something different to overcome that weariness.

We could go into many details about what causes weariness, but what fixes it is doing something different, changing your routine, adjusting your habits, or patterns, or altering your very life...going to the mountains for most of us flatlanders, renews us, revives us even!

God doesn't reside in the mountains anymore than he resides in the valleys, God is everywhere at the same time, but the mountain experiences of life seem to enable us to get closer to God, or get a better glimpse of God, or consider the nature and character of God.

I once counseled a camp at St. Mountain with a young woman dying of lung cancer. Late in the week we met on the Plateau for our parting bonfire and communion. I hauled Vicky up the treacherous hill on the back of a three-wheeler. On our descent she asked me to stop for one last majestic view of the panorama of Storm Mountain, about the 5<sup>th</sup> highest peak in the Black Hills. She remarked, "this is the last time I'll see this mountain". I paused, not sure what to say in light of her certainty that death was imminent. Finally I said; "the last time you'll see it from this perspective." Vicky died 10 days after camp concluded. The next time I was at camp I hiked to the top with her nametag and placed it on a scraggy oak bush, her final request of me.

God renews us through the mountain experiences in our lives, and we need that.

### 3. GOD USES THE MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCES OF LIFE TO GIVE US **PERSPECTIVE**

Many young, and some not so young people go to camp every summer. I am so thrilled every fall to hear the stories of peoples lives being changed by God through or during camp. I've heard a few stories already this summer from our young people. Camp can be a mountain top experience for anyone, but for young people they often act like Peter, they don't want to leave, they want to build a tent, preserve this moment. I had a young girl come to me one year at the conclusion of camp, expressing fear at the prospect of returning to the 'real world' following her amazing transformation at camp. I assured her that 'this is the real world...that world out there is screwed up.'

Many adults lament the young people returning year after year and 're-committing their lives to Christ, again and again. Some even speak of being born again, and again, and again. I know theologically we are only born once, and born again once, but for some kids, the occasion of camp gives them a chance to experience God's grace anew. We should not expect young people to make adult commitments to Jesus. A 12 or 14 year old makes a 12 year old or 14 year old commitment, and many of them need the mountain to measure how far they have progressed, not to be reminded how far (we all) have yet to go.

I was hiking with a group of kids in the Rockies late one September. We got off on this trail, I thought was a nice easy 2 mile hike. As the 3rd hour passed, and the weather got worse and worse, and the trail narrower and narrower, we finally ascended above the timber line...made a huge bend...and then could see not only how we had come, but how we would descend. The mountaintop was quite necessary to gain perspective.

I learned something else up there that day. Not much grows on the mountain, above the timberline! Most of our growth happens in the valleys of life, and we'll learn more about that next week, but for the record, we need to remember that the Mountain Top experiences of life are gifts from God, to inspire, renew and help give us perspective not only on how far we have yet to go, but also how far we have already come!

#### 4. GOD USES THE MOUNTAIN EXPERIENCES OF LIFE TO **WOO** US TO HIMSELF

In Matthew's account of this Mountain drama, he includes a little different twist. Following the cloud's appearance and heavenly pronouncement; this is "My Son, listen to him", here is what Matthew recorded:

*"The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground. Then Jesus came over and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." And when they looked, they saw only Jesus. Mt. 17:6-7*

Doesn't say Moses and Elijah were gone, but all they saw was Jesus.

When they looked...all they saw was Jesus. Mountain Top experiences in life are designed by God to be events that draw our attention to Jesus. Sometimes we get lost in our experiences of life, and miss Jesus. Sometimes we are so enamored with Moses and Elijah, or other dead things from our past, that we miss Jesus. Sometimes our worship is so good we forget it's about Jesus, even when it's not good, it's still about Jesus. Sometimes being with family and friends is so fun, we forget it's only Jesus that unites and bonds us. Sometimes we need to be struck face down, even on the majestic mountains of life, for then God will touch us, lift our faces toward heaven, and show us Jesus, again...for the first time.

Jesus was certainly not opposed to the mountain top experiences of life; he took the disciples away quite often. I'm sure they loved the undivided attention, the opportunity for fellowship, and even fun. But they often noticed that in the midst of their inspiration, renewal, and regained perspective; Jesus had slipped away...(or was found napping), but was usually found talking with his Father. God woos us to Himself, on the mountains of life.

Most people when they find themselves on the mountains of life want to do everything in their power to stay there, and preserve and protect the experience, as if it is a once in a lifetime thing. It's not!

The concluding verse from our text cannot be missed...

<sup>37</sup>*The next day, after they had come down the mountain, a huge crowd met Jesus.*

Life is not lived on the mountain; it's lived in the valleys, even deserts of everyday existence. We'll explore that more next week, but for now, let's relish the mountain we are living on, or pine for the one we just left, or long for the one that is just around the corner...while we prepare to learn the lessons from the desert...that are every bit as important as the ones we learned today.

