

“Mountains Beyond Mountains”
2 Corinthians 4:1-2, 5-10
Luke 9:28-36
Transfiguration of the Lord

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Last week we were reminded that, like Peter, each of us has heard the call of Jesus in our lives. I suspect that those gathered here this morning have elected to hear the call and to follow or you wouldn't be here. Yet, we are reminded, in the story of Peter and the other disciples, that hearing the call and electing to leave the obstacles behind and to follow, does not end the journey or the fulfillment of our Christian life --- they are only the beginning.

On the mountain top today, I suspect that Peter has caught a glimpse and perhaps thought to himself, “Ah ha! I have arrived. Look at me here, in this glorious moment. This must be what it's all about.” I have to confess, I don't blame him. There have been plenty of mountain top experiences in my own life - emotional, physical, and spiritual - that I wanted to hold on to for days and weeks to come. For Peter, this glimpse of God's glory is only that. The fulfillment of Peter's journey will not begin to happen until years later when he stands in front of a crowd on the day of Pentecost and preaches his first sermon, founding the church of Jesus Christ.

That will be then but this is now, on the mountain top. As Peter beholds Jesus in the state of transfiguration, this state of being spiritually exalted or glorified, I think Peter is hoping that some of that transfiguration will rub off on him. It almost sounds a bit comical. Peter's suggestion, of preserving the moment by building these three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, was so absurd that Jesus did not feel the need to directly respond. The voice of the divine quickly intervenes in the awkward silence, interrupting Peter's ridiculous line of thinking to remind the three disciples, and perhaps Peter in particular: *This is my son, my chosen. So pay attention and for heaven's sake listen up because you boys have a lot to learn and a long way to go.*

With the advantage of hindsight, we know that Peter's journey from the mountain top experience will eventually lead to other peaks in his own faithfulness in his spiritual journey. The journey will be a long one. A journey in which Peter will stumble often along the way, continuing to learn, to push, to question, and to grow in his strength, courage and knowledge. We ask ourselves what that roadmap looked like for Peter's spiritual journey and wonder, what is the expectation for us as we hear and follow Christ's call, but then look to the journey so far ahead.

One insight about spiritual journeys comes to me from Outliers, a book by Malcolm Gladwell. He outlines what it means to achieve a certain level of success. He begins by defining outliers as those people who achieve a substantial level of success above and beyond their peers. Gladwell defines what it is about the individual and their lives that help them achieve such substantial levels of success.

He lays out twelve different cases. He begins by telling a simple narrative about how someone has succeeded. He considers a wide range of people - from the Beatles to Bill Gates to athletes and other entrepreneurs and business leaders. He outlines the story of the "self-made-man," people who have managed to succeed at a phenomenal level completely due to their own intelligence, hard work and vigor.

He goes back to retell the story in each case and outlines the unique opportunities, privileges, resources, and community that support, nurture and equip someone for this unusual kind of success. In essence he asserts that there are a number of factors that contribute to our success, not just our self-made success.

He lays out a case for the Beatles who appear on the scene in the mid-sixties as phenomenally successful musicians; then Gladwell goes back and says that while they were talented musicians and gifted songwriters it was the fact that they got a gig playing in bars in Germany - where they played every day of the week all night long for years and put in thousands of hours of

performance - that gave them the kind of experience and skills that led to their phenomenal success.

He tells the story of Bill Gates, who seems to be a unique genius that leads him to become the giant of the software industry. Then Gladwell looks back and sees the nerdy high school kid who landed in one of the only high schools in the country (in the late sixties) that had a computer lab where Gates had full access to the early days of programming. He went on to the University of Washington, where he had access to one of the early macro-computers. Gates had access to resources that he took advantage of, putting in thousands of hours of programming until the moment when he came on the scene and was phenomenally successful.

Gladwell's stories reminded me of Michael Phelp's story of success in the Olympics a year and a half ago. News coverage detailed his body dimensions and proportions as perfectly equipped to be an excellent swimmer. Yet plenty of people have those proportions and dimensions. It is the sacrifices of his family, his mother in particular, to get him to the gym and pool for thousands of hours of practice that brought his success.

One of the many lessons that Gladwell draws from his research is what he calls, "The Principal of Ten Thousand Hours." It appears, from reviewing a number of disciplines across the spectrum, that it takes about ten thousand hours of practice to be excellent at something. He compares students at the finest music schools in the country and finds that what separates the good ones from the great ones has nothing to do with their instruments or their family or their socio-economic status, it has to do with practice! The ones who are excellent put in ten thousand hours of practice and the ones who are good simply do not. He goes on to say many of them become teachers which I did not appreciate, having been a high school music teacher, but it is true. I certainly never put in ten thousand hours of practice on the trumpet or I might not be here today.

The point that I take from Gladwell's study is that any mark of success or achievement takes hard work. It takes our own work and it takes a community

of support and nurture. It takes access to a number of resources to achieve a significant number of successes. While Gladwell focuses primarily on business, academic, athletic and artistic success, we might take those same lessons to heart as we consider the journey of our spiritual life.

Hearing God's call and choosing to respond is the beginning of a journey, realizing that God has equipped us, given us gifts for ministry and mission. Those gifts require exercise, just like our bodies require exercise for us to be fit. It is important for us to take time in the journey of our spiritual life to figure out how we can put those gifts into practice so that we can achieve a level of spiritual fitness; so we can elevate our spiritual lives for the mountains and valleys that we will encounter in our journey of life.

During the season of Lent, we are going to be exploring six spiritual practices. Not to make God love us more or to earn God's love - they provide an exercise to open us up to hearing God more clearly, to flex our spiritual muscles so we develop spiritual fitness and maturity that will prepare us for the journeys ahead.

We will talk and think together about the spiritual practice of hospitality.... of welcoming friends and strangers into our lives, our homes, our public places with graciousness.

We will take time to think together about the spiritual practice of discernment....cultivating that art of deep listening in which we hear the spirits guidance in and for our lives.

We will think together about the spiritual discipline of acts of compassion and justice....what does it mean to treat others fairly, and to work hard to create an environment in which all can fully achieve all that God has intended for them?

We will think together about the spiritual practice of worship....how we take time to give God reverence and praise and how, outside of these formal experiences of worship together in community, we find and explore acts of worship in our everyday life.

We will consider together the spiritual practice of prayer and meditation....when we listen to God, speak to God and experience God's presence in our lives.

Finally, we will explore together the spiritual practice of Sabbath keeping.... setting aside intentional time for rest, for rejuvenation, for refreshment, for fellowship, for sharing meals together and what it means to keep Sabbath, on Sunday or any other day.

These are a few of the ways we can exercise our spiritual gifts. In Haiti, there is a local Creole proverb which means "beyond mountains there are more mountains." Like many proverbs, this one has multiple meanings and uses. Sometimes the analogy of the mountain means a challenge...beyond the challenge that we face, there will be more challenges. Other times the mountains are opportunities or gifts looked forward to with optimism and the proverb says 'beyond these mountains, *yes* indeed there are even more mountains!'

In both understandings this proverb is true for our spiritual lives. We are called to journey with Jesus over rough terrains. Sometimes we are elevated onto mountain tops, other times through valleys and across plains. It is important for us to take time each day, each week, to exercise our spiritual bodies so we are prepared for the mountains beyond these mountains.

As we are about to sing in our hymn this morning, "strengthened by this glimpse of glory, fearful lest our faith decline," we, like Peter, find it tempting to remain and build a shrine, but true worship gives us courage to proclaim what we profess....that the spiritual work of our daily lives may prove us to be people of the God we bless. Amen.