

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
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Last September, Travis and I were lucky enough to go to Alaska for a week. Before we left, we'd schemed and dreamed about the trip, and we decided that it was to have three distinct purposes: to rest, to visit, and to be outside hiking. I'm glad to report that we managed to do all three in spades. We ended up taking hikes nearly every day that we were there. We did a nice 6 miler around a glacier lake near where I grew up. We did a muddy, miserable trail through a bog and mistakenly ended up at airfield. And on our last day, we hiked up a mountain called Baldy not too far from my old high school. I had suggested hiking Baldy because I had fond memories of going there after school to be with friends in nature. I don't remember it being quite so steep when I was sixteen; nevertheless, we persisted.

That morning, we were accompanied by my sister-in-law who runs half marathons with the same ease that most of us watch Netflix. As I huffed and puffed up this remarkably steep mountain, she flitted in front of us like a mountain goat and chattered away about all the things we usually talk about when we're together. I don't even think she was winded. I, on the other hand, was starting to lose focus in my eyes as I tried to keep one foot in front of the other and not fall down to the ocean below.

My efforts were eventually rewarded. As I reached the summit of the mountain, I was reminded why people climb mountains. One quirk of Baldy is that it overlooks two enormous valleys and an arm of the ocean. From that vantage, I felt like I could see the whole world—rivers, lakes, ocean, clouds, roads, homes. I could see for miles and miles with absolute clarity. I didn't hear the voice of God like the disciples in our Gospel story, but I'll admit that the world seemed a bit more holy, standing on the top of a mountain.

Today's Gospel story is not a subtle one. Peter, James, John and Jesus go to the top of a mountain together. Jesus begins to glow, and he starts talking to the long-gone prophets Elijah and Moses as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Peter realizes that something important and sacred is happening, and sensibly suggests that they all just build homes at the top of the mountain. A voice comes from the clouds proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God, and the disciples are ordered to keep quiet about what they've seen until the right time. This is the story that the churches use to teach about Jesus being revealed as the Son of God—being transfigured. But we could just as easily tell it as the story of the disciples experience a real and powerful God and their life-long quest to respond to that experience. We can emphasize different parts of the story to learn different lessons, but no matter how you slice it, it all happened at the top of a mountain.

Any ninth grader can tell you that symbols don't get much more obvious than mountains. You are at the bottom, you have no perspective. You struggle to the top, and suddenly you can see and hear differently—you have a mighty and rare perspective. Spiritual traditions talk about mountains, or stairways or ladders all the time. I think there is a deeply held belief in our collective, spiritual, subconscious that to see clearly, we need to get out of the muck of this

regular life and struggle for a better vantage point. And make no mistake; it is a struggle. If it wasn't, we wouldn't need to tell stories about it generation after generation. To see clearly, religious people have to be able to ignore our phones, our bosses, our bills, and our everyday fears. All that static is blocking God's voice telling us what is real, revealing the power of Jesus.

And so we climb in order to see and hear God.

Enter the gospel, and find yourself in front of Jesus who is radiating power, and God saying from a cloud, "This is my Son." I hear this as a bit of a rebuke. Perhaps you do, too. There are some many things in this life to which I can ascribe divinity. I can get fixated on possessions, paychecks, status. I can get fixated on achievement, work, comfort, or technology. All of these things can easily become little deities to be worshipped. But on the top of the mountain, in that place where we see and hear clearly, God tells us what is true—that the wise rabbi Jesus that we have been following is not just a pleasant teacher from Nazareth. He is instead the Son of God for whom we kneel and offer worship. That those silly things that we spend our time loving and worshiping are not real in any meaningful way.

Peter gets the message loud and clear. He might even be a bit of a teacher's pet. I do love Peter in this story. If you had a magnificent religious experience in a certain spot, wouldn't you want to stay too? I absolutely would. Why not build a home where you know God revealed Godself? That's Peter's sin, well-meaning though it was. You can't build a house to contain the glory of God. It needs to get out, to move, to serve the world.

The thing about mountains is that you have to come back down at some point. Getting up is only half the battle. What to we do when we get back down?

Church legends has it that Peter goes on to become the first Pope, James became the bishop of Jerusalem, and John goes on to write some of the most beautiful poetry in the Christian tradition. They all needed to DO something with their close experience of God, of Jesus.

As do we. It is my fervent prayer that at some point in your life, you will feel the dazzling presence on Jesus in your life and that you will hear the very voice of God. And when that happens, it is my second prayer that you will be moved to come down the mountain to help your neighbor—in word, in deed, with time, with talent, with treasure. Getting to the top is only half the story. The work of Christianity begins when we come down and share the Good News that the Son of God is among us to heal, to feed, and to love. Amen.