

## ***What is it about a Mountain?***

Transfiguration of Our Lord  
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, February 14, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 9: 28-43

We stood on the mountain and sang:

*In Christ there is no east or west, / In him no south or north,  
But one great fellowship of love / Throughout the whole wide earth.*

Fifty-four voices singing about God's creation as we gathered 2,000 feet above the Thessalian Plain in one of the most stunning and spectacular places I have ever seen – the cliffs of Meteroa in Greece. And the experience moved me inward and caused me to ponder: What is it about a mountain? What is it about a mountain that lures us to stand atop it and gaze off at the world below? What is it about a mountain that hypnotizes us once we're there and won't seem to let us go, so that we often stay longer than we had planned and, when we do leave, we walk slowly and reluctantly? These are just some of the questions that cruised through my mind and soul as I stood looking down at the little town of Kalambaka and up at the snow covered mountains of Koziakas on that magnificent day back in January 2004. What is it about a mountain?

Is it the peace we find there -- a peace away from the hustle, hassle, and crowds below? Is it the awe we experience – the awe of seeing the vastness of creation in the view of the endless heavens above and the expanse of the earth below? Is it the vitality we feel – the vitality of the wind in our faces that reminds us that we can feel and are alive? What is it about a mountain?

Scripture has a preponderance of mountaintop experiences; our lessons for today present us with two of them, and I want to add a third for us to reflect upon this morning from the end of the Pentateuch, because I think it will shed some needed light on the question my sermon title asks today.

Near the end of his career as Israel's greatest prophet, leader and lawgiver, Moses stood on Mount Nebo after the 40 year escape from Egypt and the sojourn in the wilderness. And there the Lord showed him all the land which he had promised to give his people from the call of Abraham onward. Moses' whole life had been given to God in an effort to bring Israel, God's people, to this land. It was Moses, you remember, who alone had seen God, and our first lesson described how his face glowed because of that encounter. It was Moses who had delivered the law to the people after his encounter with God on that other mountain, Mount Sinai. He kept leading, and judging, and interceding for this rebellious lot, ever trying to reach the Promised Land. Finally, there it was stretched out before his eyes. His life of leadership and devotion had not been spent in vain. Now his heart pounded as he looked on the culmination of all that he had done for God and for God's people.

But his final joy, the joy of running the soil of God's Promised Land through his fingers, his final joy was not to be. For Moses would only see the Promised Land from afar. "I have let you see it with your eyes," says the Lord, "but you shall not go over there." So

Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, outside the land of promise.

We don't have time this morning to explore the interpretations of that event. But there is a simpler truth that we can attend to, one that we know only too well, and it is this: all people of faith, even the greatest and the most devout servant of God, can see the Promised Land only from afar. Granted, Moses' people entered the land, but they also had to learn that this was not their permanent homeland. All people of faith see the final Promised Land only from afar.

Our Gospel text about another mountain brings us the same lesson. Jesus and three disciples went on the mountain to pray and what began as an act of devotion and piety, turned out to be an intense religious experience for all of them, for they saw the glory of God revealed. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain, to surround himself forever in the goodness and glory of God. But Jesus knew they couldn't stay. Did you hear the last section of our Gospel account today? Jesus leads his disciples down the mountain, into the valley, where the very first thing he does is heal a young boy. Peter wanted to stay on the mountaintop and preserve the intense moment. Jesus led them down the mountain into the valley where living takes place with all its pains and troubles and heartaches.

Former Bishop in Michigan, Milt Reisen reminds us: "Spiritual experiences and encounters still have the same effect upon people today. There is the desire to return or stay on the mountaintops of our spiritual highs. But the real test is always when we come down off the mountaintops of experience and enter into the valleys where life is real, where people hurt, where we become the extension in time of God's love in Christ."

No, that mountain of long ago, indeed, all mountains are not our home. The disciples had to go back into the valley where the hard realities of life faced them – sickness, suffering, rejection, death. They caught a glimpse of God's Kingdom but they will have to see it from a distance. They are pilgrims on a mission and they must get on with their work. The mountain is a respite, not a home.

It isn't hard to make the transition to our lives about this learning. We know that faith involves a certain seeing from a distance. We see God's love, we experience God's grace, we know something of forgiveness – but it is never complete or total. We perceive it in spurts. Our life of faith isn't complete as we walk our pilgrim paths on this earth. And while this dimension of faith may disturb and perplex us at times, it does point to the real sustaining basis for faith – and that is the faithfulness of God. Moses led and walked and stumbled at times for a whole generation in the wilderness toward it. Now he was permitted to see the fulfillment of that promise. He would never get there – but God was faithful to his people. The basis of faith, you see, is not Moses and his service to God. No, the basis of faith, your faith, my faith, is always the faithfulness of God who keeps his promises.

And it is precisely God's faithfulness which saves us from our compulsion to possess our own lives, to try to secure them permanently in this world, in the here and now. No longer do we have to spend all our energies stockpiling our worldly goods, or keeping up with the neighbors, or building reputations, or fretting over all the pettinesses that can darken our days. The faithfulness of God roots our lives in His Kingdom – where love

rules, where justice reigns, where sharing is the norm for life, where selfishness is replaced by servanthood. And although we only get a glimpse of that world from time to time in our daily lives, it is God's call to discipleship, of those who would follow him, to help build that world here.

We have a vivid reminder today of our pilgrim status on this earth. As we gather to celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar, we are reminded that this meal of love and forgiveness and grace is but a glimpse, a foretaste, of a banquet prepared for all of us. We even sometimes call this a feast. But what a strange feast? The courses are limited, the portions small – a morsel of bread, a taste of wine, hardly enough to satisfy our appetites and fill us up.

But what we are offered here is enough to sustain us on the way, enough to enable us to travel as pilgrims over this land, enough to give us a fascinating glimpse of what God has for us. What we do here each week, in hymns, in prayers, in scripture, in preaching, is to taste, to sense, to see, to feel, to know with the eyes of faith what promises God has for us. What we do here each week is to sustain the hope of a better world God shows us glimpses of. What we do here each week is remind ourselves of God's love and faithfulness because we are the weary pilgrims he calls to be his disciples.

Bruce Feiler wrote a fascinating account of his journey in the Holy Land. It is titled Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses. It was on the New York's Times best seller list for months and I recommend it to you. At the end of his account, as he stood where Moses' stood, on the top of Mount Nebo looking over into the Promised Land which Moses never got to actually set foot in, Feiler had an amazing insight. He wrote this in his journal:

Moses may not get the land, but he gets the promise. This is the lesson of Mount Nebo and the poetic twist at the end of the Five Books of Moses that make them such a hymn: The land alone is not the destination; the destination is the place where human beings live in consort with the divine. . . . At the end, Moses wasn't looking at the land. He was looking where we *should* look. He was looking at God.

What is it about a mountain? It is a glimpse and a taste that gives us the courage and the strength to go back to where we live and to serve in the name of the one who walks everyday and every path with us.

AMEN.

Copyright © 2010, Glenn E. Ludwig. All rights reserved.