

Sermon for Sunday,
February 23, 2020
by
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[0:02] Although this sounds like the start of a really bad novel, it was a hot and sticky August afternoon.

[laughter] We had

been traveling for days
in a foreign land, and
we were gritty, and
salty [*laughter*]. The
thirteen youth pilgrims
and four adult leaders

and I stood waiting for
a train at the base of
Snowdon Mountain in
Wales, the highest peak
in Wales. From the top,
you can see four

countries. You can see
Wales, you can see
Ireland, you can see
Scotland, and even you
can see their mortal
enemy, England. The

ride up is long. It's 4.7 miles of some of the steepest railway ever designed by humans: it is rack-and-pinion.

You know, when you

go up the roller
coaster—the “thp thp
thp thp thp,” right
before the
“*whaaaaaaah!!!*”—
it’s like that, but all the

way up, 4.7 miles. And that's worth going up, this mountain. About three-quarters of the way up, our guide says, "Now, if you look to

the right, you'll see the
lake where supposedly
the Lady of the Lake
gave King Arthur,
Excalibur, signifying

that he would be the
king of the Britons.”

[1:28] And without
missing a beat, one of
our children says,

“Look, moistened
women lying in ponds
distributing swords is
no basis for a system of
government [*laughter*].
Supreme executive

power comes mainly
from the masses, not
from some farcical
aquatic ceremony
[*laughter*].” Quoted
directly from Monty

Python and the Holy Grail. It was a proud moment. [*sustained laughter*] Where else in the world can you say that and it has that

meaning? [*continued
laughter*]

[2:07] Anyone who's
been on a mountain
knows how special

being on top of a mountain is, whether you took a train ride up, or you hiked up yourself. It's an accomplishment to be

on top of a mountain.
And in the Bible, it's
basically chock-a-block
full of mountain
experiences. Where do
you meet God? It's

either in the wilderness
or on a mountain,
historically. Think
about it.

[2:33] Where does
Moses, who brought
the laws in Matthew's
gospel—Jesus is like
the new Moses, like the
better version of

Moses—you'll notice it will all be connected here in a second. But where does Moses go to receive the Ten Commandments?

[*congregation, “the mountain!”*] Top of the mountain, right?!

Where does Elijah go to get his commission as a prophet and

actually sees God and
lives? Mount Horeb,
on the top of the
mountain!

[3:01] A fun sidebar to that is what he sees of God is actually God's naked behind, but he gets to see God and live. The only man to

ever do this. I'm not making this up; it's in the Bible!

[3:14] Jesus had just come down from the

mountain a little bit
ago, a couple chapters
ago in Matthew's
gospel, and he is
preaching his sermon
on the ...

[*congregation,*
“mountain!”] Right!
Because he is on a
mountain! So, why do
things happen on
mountains? So, it's

maybe no surprise that
the top of this mountain
was the place where
Jesus had to go to take
his disciples.

[3:37] Now, if you
look in the text from
Exodus—you look in
the text from the
Gospel this morning—
you will see some

parallels. How long
was Moses on the
mountain?

[*congregation, “forty
days”*] How long was
Jesus in the wilderness?

[*congregation, “forty days”*] Right! How long is Lent?

[*congregation, “forty days”*] Alright, good! Driving along ... how

many days was it that it
took Moses to get
there? [*congregation,*
“forty days”] Close!
Not forty days, six
days! [*laughter and*

comments] How long
did Jesus take to meet
the disciples?

[laughter and

comments] Six days!

Right, there are some

parallels going on here.
But these mountaintop
experiences as they are
happening or that
everyone has had. And
if you've been on a

mountaintop, you've probably had an experience like this, too. You get a sense of clarity, a sense of revelation. And I hope

that in this season of
Epiphany that we are
winding up this week,
that you've had some
moments of revelation
and some moments of

clarity about your faith,
and about how God has
been working inside of
you. Because
Epiphany's about to
come to an end, and we

end it on the top of this
mountain.

[4:56] The Wales
pilgrimage to the top of
the mountain, we found

a circular, large piece
of brass, embedded into
the rock. And there
were three points—not
four, like a compass,
but three—and there

were about twenty
different lines going to
near objects, so that
you could see different
towns and different
villages and about

where they were on this circle. And we noticed a number of things on the top of the mountain. The first we noticed was when we left, it

was about 78° ; when we got on the top of the mountain, it was about 41° . We were not equipped, [*laughter*] and people who had

sweatshirts became
best friends pretending
to live in your
sweatshirt.

[5:41] What we found on the mountaintop was that it was windy, and as we were lined up to take a photograph, we had to wait because a

large cloud decided to
blow through. And by
“blow through,” I mean
our hair was like [*uses*
hand gestures to
indicate hair blown all

over the place], it was
windy up there, right?
And so, the photograph
that we have is kind of
this cloud that's
weeping, and you can

see that we are all
covered in that dew
that forms when you've
been in a cloud where
you've got little
droplets of water on

your hair and on your
face; it's really cold in
that.

[6:09] The disciples
were similarly not

prepared for what they
were going to
experience up on the
mountaintop. They
went up there not
knowing what Jesus

was going to do. They thought maybe he would do what he usually did, which was to pray. But, all of a sudden, they had this

pyrotechnic experience,
and Jesus was glowing,
bright as the sun. Not
only was Jesus glowing
as bright as the sun,
which is kind of weird

and shockingly
terrifying, he is
speaking to them as to
the pillars of their faith.

[6:38] Moses, now
Elijah—the person who
gave the law and the
greatest prophet was
whisked up to Heaven
in a whirlwind. Now,

we didn't have that
experience on our
mountaintop, but, at the
same point in time, the
disciples do a very
important thing—they

fall down in fear and
trembling. They are
overwhelmed by what
they are experiencing;
they are on sensory
overload, and the only

thing that they know
how to do is out of
fear—fall over. And
then Jesus does a
remarkably human,
wonderful, tender,

loving thing: he turns
off the bright lights,
tells Moses and Elijah
to go away, and he's
just there, he's just
come with them. And

he touches them, and says, “*Get up. Do not be afraid.* Get up. Do not be afraid.” He reaches out to them in healing. He reaches

out to them in taking
their fear and their
anxiety—something
they cannot explain;
something that is
beyond all language—

and he makes it real to them *again*. And it is just their friend, their master, their teacher, Jesus, sitting there with them. And then, he

goes down the
mountain, and he takes
his disciples with him.

[8:08] Now, when we
went down the

mountain, we *bubbled*
down the mountain. It
took us three hours to
get down the mountain.
We didn't make it
down the mountain

until it was practically
darn near dark. We
were all a-chatter with
everything we had
seen, all we had
experienced, and, “The

cloud! Wasn't that
great!" And we were
going down the
mountain, down the
windward side of the
mountain, which is a

nice, gentle slope. And then there is the leeward side of the mountain, which drops off like right down, like, “oh, my God!”,

like a thousand-foot
straight drop down, and
with sharp jagged rocks
below. And we took a
path that was right
along the knife edge for

about the first mile, just
walking down. And we
had so much to talk
about, we had
experienced so much!
Talk, talk, talk,

wheeeew! Motor-
mouth the entire way
down! Right!

[8:50] But, one can
imagine the disciples

going down the
mountain, and boy!, I'll
bet they had a lot of
questions, too, right?
[disciples whispering]
“What just happened?”

“I don’t know!”

“That was scary!”

“Yeah, was that really
Elijah?”

And Jesus says, “Don’t
tell anyone.”

[*laughter*] Right?

Yeah!

[9:13] The important point is that, in that cloud, in that moment,

comes God's voice, and
it interrupted Peter who
was doing the only
thing I think we could
have done, that we
could have done up on

the mountain? We
would freak out, and
then try and do
something to make
sense of the situation!
“I know, let’s build

three different dwelling
places! I know, let's go
get some wood! We'll
go carpenter it up! It'll
be a great place for
Jesus, Elijah, Moses!"

[9:36] And God said,
“Stop. Shut up. This is
my son, my beloved,
with whom I am well
pleased. Shut up and
listen to him.” How

hard is that going to be
for the disciples when
they get down off the
mountain? [*really
hard*] How much are

they doing to fail at
that? A whole lot!

[9:55] Jesus knows
that he is coming off
that mountain and he is

going to go march to
his death. The
disciples don't know
that, but every time
Jesus gives a
command, they kind of

screw it up. In the weeks to come, notice as we listen to Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "go do *this*." And they go do

that. So much so, that one of them, as Jesus is about to be killed, denies even knowing Jesus three times. The

listen to him part?—
didn't get it.

[10:28] We are coming
off of a mountaintop
experience in

Epiphany, and we are about to get down the hill into Lent. Lent provides us a wonderful time—forty days of listening for

God. Forty days of
time to do some deep
introspection into how
it is we have not
walked with Jesus—
either up that mountain

or down that mountain.
Forty days of time to
figure out where it is
that we have missed
what God has said,
even if it's been

pyrotechnical,
spectacular in front of
us. I don't know about
you, but the moments
when I have felt the
most alone, and the

moments when I have
felt like I have been in
my darkest places,
there has been that
hand of Jesus that has
come down and

touched me, to get up
and do not be afraid.

Have you ever had that
happen? It might not
be God's hand, but it
might be someone you

love. It might be
someone you haven't
talked to for five years,
your best friend, and all
of a sudden the phone
rings, and just when

you are in that pit of
like, “what am I going
to do—this is terrible—
my life is falling
apart—this is crazy!”
And someone calls, and

all of a sudden you get
pulled out of that. Get
up, do not be afraid!
I've had that happen
probably a dozen times
in my life, and every

time it happens, I say,
“Thanks be to God!” If
you haven’t had one, I
beg you to take a look
backwards at the places
where you have been in

the biggest, darkest pit,
or when you have been
in the brightest
ridiculous light and you
don't even know which
way is up, it's so great!

And see where
someone has reached
down and said, “Get
up! It’s going to be
okay!”

[12:19] We have this time in front of us for Lent to do this work of looking and seeing how far we have come away from where Jesus is

telling us to go; where we have not listened to the Beloved. But, what I beg us to remember in that, is the truth, is that *Jesus is always there*

with us! Like he was
there all of a sudden
with the disciples. It
was just Jesus there.
And it will be just Jesus
there with us, always!

[12:53] Now, at the end of Matthew's gospel, at the very end, the very last couple sentences, after he dies and has been

resurrected, this point
is driven home. He
says to his disciples,
“Go up onto the
mountain and I will
show you. And when I

am there,” he says,
“and I tell you go and
make disciples of all
nations, teaching them
all of the things I have
taught you. And

remember, I will be
with you to the end of
the age, always.”

[13:28] In Lent, let us
remember that Jesus is

there with us, always—
even when we confront
the darkest parts of us;
even when we lay
ourselves bare in front
of God—that Jesus is

right there, arm
outstretched, waiting to
touch us, and tell us to
get up and do not be
afraid.

A⁹⁹