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Sermon for February 19, 2012

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday
Year B

Scripture Text: 2 Kings 2:1-12
Mark 9:2-9

Life on the Downslope

Back when I was younger, I spent a great deal of my free time backpacking along the Appalachian Trail. Anytime I could cobble together more than three days in a row and convince either my parents or some other person to take me out to some desolate spot and then pick me up sometime later in some other remote area, I would grab my gear and head off for another adventure in hiking. Those were magical days for me, wandering about the wilderness trails of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia in search of yet one more unexplored, by me at least, trail that would lead me to yet to be discovered sights and experiences or to some great vista that would allow the world below to be displayed in all of its grandeur.

I can recall several such times along one of the less well known and thus not crowded side trails of the main Appalachian Trail that connects with the Appalachian Trail in the middle of the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and then goes West through Virginia until it reaches the Virginia West Virginia Boarder and then continues North into Pennsylvania only to turn East and South again through Pennsylvania connecting up again with the Appalachian Trail near a small town on the Maryland-Pennsylvania border called Boonsboro whose singular claim to fame is to be the town closest to the first monument erected to George Washington in 1827 on top of South Mountain in what is now known as Washington Monument State Park. This trail, known as the Big Blue Trail moves up and down the western Appalachian Chain providing anyone who will travel its 450 mile distance with some of the most challenging wilderness hiking on the East Coast and rewarding the persistent hiker with some of the most spectacular views of the Cumberland Valley and the surrounding countryside. But for each of the many vistas that this trail has to offer there comes with them an admission price.

First are the sweat inducing and lung aching ascents that the hiker must endure. For even the most fit long distance hiker, who is already carrying on his or her back their housing, their kitchen, their clothing and their food and water, there comes the additional burden of as much additional water one can carry because while sweeping in their sight and stunning for their views

these vistas have no available water and there comes the knowledge that the next water stop will be about a day away. But even with all of the added weight of the additional water and all of the sweat that will be generated as one scrambles up the loose rocky path to the top of one of these great vantages with names like Bald Knob or the Devil's Staircase or Eagle's Rest there comes also the anticipation of what one will be able to experience from such a height. And no matter the season, no matter the weather, no matter the time of day, I was never disappointed. I can recall slowly making my way up the Devil's staircase in a late spring rain through a cold misty drizzle that even with all of the exertion of that moment still chilled me to the bone. Following a trail that more resembled a creek than a footpath, I slogged my way up the Staircase, water from the misty rain mingling with the sweat from my hard work soaking my clothes and chilling me all the more, only to emerge from this all encompassing mist to find myself above the clouds and bathed in the warm afternoon sunlight.

This was truly a mountaintop experience. Warmed by the sun I began to dry out and relax from the exertion of the day that had brought me to this place and standing there on top of that mountain with the whole of the Cumberland Valley laid out at my feet and with the signs of spring in evidence all around me I could not help but proclaim aloud to anyone who could hear the opening line of Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork." Up there on that mountaintop everything was right – the world was peaceful in the glow of the setting sun, the air was scrubbed clean by the gentle rain that I had struggled through all day to get to that point, and I was in the presence of the divine bathed in sunlight and hidden from the world by a shroud of mist; and so I stayed in that place for the night, above it all, surrounded by stars and the quiet sounds of that windswept wilderness vista.

But then morning came and I was faced with the reality of a long journey down and back to a world that I had left behind for a while. Now the odd reality of hiking is that for all of the difficulty that one faces going up to such a place, one finds out quite quickly that coming down is at least twice as hard. There might be a little less weight on one's back going down because water and food have been consumed, but the advantage of that is greatly overcome by the stress and strain that is placed on the knees and other joints as one attempts to defy gravity by staying upright all while descending down paths that are just as steep and rocky as the one's going up. Step by bone jarring step I made my way down back to a reality that included work schedules, school assignments, car repairs and all of the rest of the mundane and challenging issues of life that I left behind when I climbed up that mountain.

Back once again to life on the downslope.

Peter, James and John have been to the Mountaintop they have seen sights that they could hardly imagine Elijah and Moses standing with Jesus who has been changed from just another itinerant rabbi into a being who is clothed in dazzling white clothes. A being who is spoken of through the mountain mists by the divine voice of God proclaiming him again as the beloved Son of God and commanding the gathered disciples to listen to him. Peter wants to build shelters for Jesus and Elijah and Moses on that mountaintop, perhaps in hopes of staying there in the presence of them all, in the presence of God far away, far above all of the rest of the world. And yet Jesus leaves and starts back down the mountain and commands the three who came with him to hold their tongues and not speak of what had happened.

Elisha, has traveled with his mentor and teacher, Elijah, on one long last journey. From Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho to the Jordan and then across the Jordan – all of these places important in the life and history of the people of Israel, all of these places where God made known God's presence to a wandering people seeking a place to call their own. The tension is high because everyone – Elijah, Elisha, the companies of prophets they meet along the way and the reader – everyone knows how this journey will end. Elijah will be gone and Elisha will take up his mantle and will then continue on as the next prophet, calling the people of God to renewed relationship with their God and proclaiming for all who will listen that God, their God, is not an absent far off deity but a strong and present God who is intimately connected to the people of God. Elijah is swept up in a chariot of fire and in a moment Elisha is left alone to make the return journey and to begin his ministry where Elijah left off.

For Peter, James and John as it was for Elisha the journey down from the mountain wither literal or figurative was difficult for at the end of that journey came not a life of renewed energy marked by the reaffirmation of God's people to turn around and see what they had been missing by living lives that turned their backs on God; rather it was a life that lead to continued struggles, continued challenges and for the disciples especially a life of tragedy as they witnessed the torture and death of their companion and teacher.

And yet for them as it was for me on that mountain as it is for us all life on the downslope is what we are called to do.

Mountain top experiences are great and needed for in those times as it was for the three disciples we are offered moments of great clarity and vision. For those of us who claim to be Christians these mountain top experiences can lead us to a time of transformation where we ourselves begin to see Christ in a new and transfigured light and where we might gain clarity on what it means to not only be in the presence of the divine but to respond to our own calls to ministry. But up on the mountain is not where our ministry happens; just like up on that mountain on the Big Blue Trail was not where my life was going to be fully lived out.

So down the mountain we must come like the disciples like Elisha like all who have come before us and who will come after us we must come down from the pinnacle and reengage in our lives on the downslope where our great vision and clarity meets the reality of the world. So with every difficult step we take away from the mountain top we come one step closer to a world that both yearns and is sometimes repelled by our faithful living and ministry.

But the good news is this, whether it was Elisha or whether it was the disciples or whether it is us in our own journeys of faith right here and now we do not travel the path down the mountain alone rather we are both companioned and led by God who, for us is witnessed to us through the life death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ who walked first down the mountain and then all the way to Jerusalem and a cross.

Today is transfiguration Sunday where we remember the change that occurred to Jesus on that lonely mountaintop on the way to Jerusalem. As we remember the change to Jesus, let us also remember how the disciples and we ourselves are changed as we discover again the presence of God's divine Son in the midst of our daily lives here on the downslope and how we are called

once again to listen to this one who will lead us and companion us all the way from the mountaintop down into the valley and far beyond.

Amen.

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