

WGUMC May 28, 2017 Exodus 3:1-5 and Micah 4:1-5
God in Creation: "The View From Here"

I was listening to Forum on KQED the other day when Tommy Caldwell came on to promote his new book, *The Push: A Climber's Journey of Endurance, Risk and Going Beyond Limits*. Caldwell is the guy who, along with Kevin Jorgeson, was the first to free climb the Dawn Wall of El Capitan in 2015. Defying the odds and all kinds of laws of nature, Caldwell ascended 3,000 feet with no aids and only nine fingers. It took 19 days.

I remember following his progress and wondering what makes people crazy enough to want to climb up the sheer face of a mountain? Well, there are psychologists who study these things, and one of them has concluded that mountain climbers have two competing drives: to prove themselves and lose themselves at the same time. Climbers talk about a sense of "flow," which is when you are totally immersed in what you are doing. Being "in the flow" is a letting go of everything else,

including your ego. People get addicted to mountain climbing because it can lead them to have some very powerful, even mystical experiences. Mountains can stretch your mind and body and spirit so far that you break through to "something beyond all previously conceived limits of being." [Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 39]

Mountain climbers, who are not necessarily known to be super religious folks, will often use very spiritual language when they talk about why they do what they do. And it's no wonder, because throughout human history mountains have been the go to if you want to have a powerful spiritual experience.

If you read the Bible, you know that God likes to show up on the tops of mountains. In this morning's Scripture, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush on Mount Horeb. Later, God will give the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Solomon will build the House of God on Mount Zion. Jesus will preach his Sermon on a Mount, somewhere in Galilee. He will be

transfigured on a mountain near Caesarea Philippi and ascend to heaven from the Mount of Olives near Bethany. So, clearly, mountains are one of God's favorite places to display power.

But that can make a mountain a very dangerous place to be. When Moses goes up to God on Mount Sinai, God warns the people not to go near the mountain or touch any part of it or they will die. When Elijah crouches in a cave on Mount Horeb, God sends a windstorm, then an earthquake, then a fire and finally an eerie silence, all to flush Elijah out of his hiding place.

Mountains have a way of making us feel vulnerable. In Exodus, God tells Moses to take off his sandals. "Bare your feet because you are standing on my holy mountain." But taking off his sandals means he can't run away. And that makes Moses even more afraid. He tries to hide his face, but it's no use. He can't run; he can't hide. And he is keenly aware of the fact that it's not only the soles on his feet that are bare. There on the mountain, Moses knows that he is totally exposed, mind, body

and soul. All of his defenses, all of his excuses, are stripped away.

In the next verses, God is going to tell him that he is the one to liberate the people from slavery, and Moses will ask, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses knows that he doesn't have the knowledge or the courage, he doesn't have the leadership or the authority that he's going to need and, what's more, he knows that God knows. God knows all our limitations and God has heard all of our excuses. But God will reply, "I will be with you," which is God's promise to make up for whatever Moses is lacking in himself to do a job that is as big as a mountain.

I planned this sermon to be about what mountains could teach us about God, but first mountains teach us about ourselves, and they do this by taking us to our limits and making us face them. Mountains have a way of letting us know that we are not in charge, that there are real limits to our

strength, our skill and our resources to deal with the tasks and challenges of life. I come up to my own limits each and every day. But as Moses and Tommy Caldwell found out, there is a power in the universe that can stretch us beyond those limits, enabling us to do things we never thought we could do.

Christians call that power "grace."

We probably aren't going to free climb the Dawn Wall anytime soon, but there are plenty of other mountains we have to climb in our lives and they can be just as formidable as El Capitan. Sometimes we summit them. Sometimes we fall off them. Always, we need to respect them. The Nepalese man who climbed Mount Everest at the age of 76, failed to recapture his world record last week at the age of 85. There are some limits we can't go beyond.

This story made me sad and reminded me that we can never take a mountain for granted. And the same is true for God. God is even more awesome and unpredictable than

Everest is. No matter how many times we've been up to the summit, God cannot ever be conquered or tamed. God will always be a test, a life or death proposition. God will always require the most of us and, even if we can get to the top of that mountain, will leave us breathless every time.

So more important than what mountains teach us about ourselves is what they teach us about God. I'm afraid that too much of our theology these days sounds more like feel-good psychology. Too many Christians try to take too much of the risk out of a relationship with God, too much of the danger and adventure out of following Jesus. We want God to come down off the mountain and stop demanding so much of us. We want God to comfort us, not to challenge us. We are always tempted to domesticate the divine, so it's a good thing that mountains help us keep God wild.

When Hank and I were dating I tried to kill him by taking him to Yellowstone Park and hiking up Mount Washburn, the

highest easily accessible peak in the park. It was a cloudless sky when we started, but by early afternoon, I could see thunderstorms in the distance. Just as we got above the tree line, the wind started to blow. Then the lightning began to flash and the hail began to fall. We were making our way along a rocky ledge and Hank was freaking out. And all the while, I'm saying, "It will blow over. It will blow over." And after a very scary fifteen minutes, it did.

When you are caught in a storm on a mountain, you not only have to appreciate the awesome power of God; you have to depend upon it! But mountains are not just places of danger and the very real risk of death. They are places of incredible beauty where we see only what is real in life. From a mountain, Moses could see into the Promised Land, even if he never got to go there. Elijah was allowed to see the glory of God pass by. And the disciples saw a vision of Moses and Elijah with Jesus, transfigured in the light.

Those of us who live in the valley need to remember stories like this because it's awfully easy to live here and think that the life we are living is the only possibility for us. What mountains do for me is give me a much broader horizon for my hope. When I'm up high in the Sierras or the Rockies, they put all of my little problems in perspective. They make me feel small and insignificant, for which I'm grateful, for that means that I don't have to take myself so seriously. They remind me that I am not the center of the universe and that the world is much bigger than me, and God is much bigger than the world. I look down and see the forces that have pushed up the mountains and are ever so slowly wearing them down again and I think that even something as solid and steadfast as a mountain is always moving and changing and no matter how rock-headed and hard-hearted I am, I can move and change, too.

The Prophet Micah is speaking to people who live down in the valley as we do. Their problem is that they can't see a future that isn't just as distressingly corrupt and chaotic and violent as the present. So while they sit there, watching their world fall apart, he tries to get them to imagine going up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. The view from there is not only astounding, it is healing. From there they can see life as it could be and, with God's grace, will be.

More and more each day, it seems as if our world is falling apart. I'm worried that our country is breaking apart. Following the news is exhausting, but ignoring the news could be devastating. So what do we do? I encourage you to go up to the mountain of the Lord, daily if need be. Whether you use your muscles or just your mind, I urge you to risk that climb. Give it everything you got. And when you reach your limits, push past them until you are in the zone, feeling the flow. Lose yourself on that mountain. Eventually you will find yourself on

the summit. As soon as you get there, take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. Stop and listen, because even without a burning bush, God wants to talk to you. While you're waiting, look around. There are no words for what you can see. No camera can capture it. No artist can paint it. But with God's grace, you can live it. Your mountain is waiting for you. Go to it.