

Sermon: Is it all downhill from here?

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, Feb. 14, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Mont Saint-Hilaire is probably my favourite mountain to climb when I was living in Montreal. It's not really a mountain per se, more of a high hill, part of the Monteregian chain of hills, and it is conveniently located 1/2 hr drive from the city centre. The height of its summit, according to Wikipedia, is about 414 meter from the sea level. One could complete the climb in about 2 hours — sufficiently challenging yet certainly suitable for a family day trip, or a church outing.

I remember the first time I did the climb with Daisy, bringing Justin and Neo — they were only toddlers then. We had to grasp their hand tightly up the hill just so they would be secure. Then the next time, they were walking alongside of us, then running circles around us. Then the last time we did the climb a few year back, they were running so far ahead that we simply gave up trying to catch up. Kids do grow up fast, too fast I think.

The panoramic view on top of Mont Saint-Hilaire is simply spectacular. You could see the surrounding regions of St Lawrence Lowland, with suburbs dotting among apple orchards and lush green farmlands. On a clear day, the skyscrapers of Montreal are just off to the northwestern horizon, and the tall mountain range of Jay Peak to the southeast. The breath-taking view had drawn me back to it again and again.

While I enjoy the climb up the hill very much, I can't say the same thing about the climb down. One really has to watch out for each step, not to be fooled by the momentum downhill, which could easily result in embarrassing tumble, or even catastrophic injury. I recall having to remind my boys, 'don't run, walk firmly' repeatedly. There is something almost sad, mentally, about going downhill. It seems like the best part of the mountaintop experience is over, now all that is left is the long and treacherous trek ahead. The phrase 'it is all downhill from here' never strikes me as something comforting or easy, rather it evokes disappointment, a letdown.

I wonder how the disciples Peter, John and James felt as they accompanied Jesus down that unnamed mountain, in the Scripture passage we have just read in Mark 9. The passage common known as the Transfiguration. According to the Gospel account of Mark, shortly after Peter had proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, and their teacher began to reveal to them about his coming

suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus took the three disciples up an unknown mountain. There on that mountaintop, Jesus was “transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” (Mark 9:2-3). What was even more amazing to Peter, John and James, more than their brightly lit teacher, was the appearance of Moses and Elijah seemingly talking to Jesus.

Completely baffled by the sight before them, Peter, always the one talking before thinking, and leaping before surveying, said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Not certain what he really had in mind, nor where the three disciples would dwell, perhaps out of fear, out of not able to comprehend the vision before him, Peter wanted to hold on, to hang on, for as long as he could.

The same dynamic took place also in 2 Kings 2, our reading today that describes the final interaction between Elisha and his beloved teacher Elijah. The Lord God was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elisha the disciple was unable to let go. So he repeatedly proclaimed “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the pair criss-crossed from Gilgal near Jordan to Bethel in the west, back to Jericho in the east, then finally arriving at the river Jordan, where God sent a chariot of fire to separate the two, and took Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. It should be noted that the double share of spirit that Elisha demanded, was granted by God in an interesting way — the total number of miracles eventually performed by Elisha outpaced that performed by Elijah, his teacher by exactly 2:1. They are all recorded in 1st and 2nd Kings

I want to circle back to ‘holding on’, there is something both genuine and foolhardy about wanting to hold on. Genuine because that simply is human nature. When something is good and precious, we fear that once it is gone, it will never return. Foolhardy because if that something good is from the divine, we could never hold on to it as if we could someone play the divine. We are not God. We do not and could not see the whole picture. We will never truly comprehend the will of God, nor could we ever imagine we could somehow control God’s agenda. We can only let God be God.

Coming back to the transfiguration of Jesus, the fact this story is reported in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 9:2-13; Matt. 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36) and is alluded to in John’s Gospel (John 1:14) as well as in 2 Peter 1:16-18, it underscores that Peter, James, and John never forgot their trip with Jesus up on that mountain. It was their ultimate mountaintop experience.

They may not have the theological understanding as pointed out by many biblical scholars that Moses symbolizes the era of the Law, and Elijah symbolizes

the era of Prophets. They may not have understood these two eras must come to an end, so the era of Christ, or as John Calvin puts it — the Kingdom of Christ, will prosper and go forth, and not be confined in a tent with a narrow limit of twenty or thirty feet.

What the disciples did see was a cloud overshadowed them, and what they did hear was a voice from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved”, the same proclamation uttered by God when Jesus was first baptized in the river Jordan, but now with an added instruction, “listen to him!” — “listen to him!” The disciples saw and heard and understood — to listen is to obey. Clarifying why they were brought up to that mountaintop in the first place — to practice the discipline of obedience, to the Lord.

Somewhere along my own spiritual journey, I started to develop that discipline of obedience. Not all invitation comes from the Lord, but when I am able to discern a call coming from God, I will not say no, no matter how uncomfortable, how frightening, how much I must step out of the boat.

My own mountaintop experience came in the summer of 2003, during a retreat that I helped organized for youth groups of New Life Gospel Church in Toronto. I was serving back then as one of the counsellors of the College & University fellowship. During the last evening of the retreat, the speaker issued an ‘alter call’, inviting young people to come forward, those wishing to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour, to pray and to receive blessing. It was and still is a popular practice among evangelical churches. As a youth counsellor, I’ve witnessed a number of alter calls before. I knew my job was to dutifully note down the names of those who went forward, so to follow up with each person afterward.

However, that particular alter call was a bit different. The speaker issued a second call, inviting to come forward those who pledging to give their lives as a living sacrifice to the Lord. I recalled at that time the strangely warm feeling in my heart, and with just split second of hesitation, I leapt forward as if to grab hold of that double share of spirit, walked down the aisle to the front, and knelt down among that group of wide-eye, giddy youth, joining in prayer and receiving my share of blessing. Other than my fast beating heart, which I attributed to just an adrenaline rush, I didn’t think too much of it afterwards. I should’ve known that someone would have reported me to my pastor at that time. Sure enough, Pastor Allen Hu came to me a few months later, invited me to consider going to seminary study. But that’s another story altogether.

Sometimes I hear in conversation with others, how they wish they could experience the divine, to experience the inexplicable elation of their mountaintop. I would often cautiously inquire, are they truly ready to have their lives altered

completely, to repent, to turn around from their former ways and to follow the way of Christ? Because that is what a mountaintop experience is all about.

I wonder how the three disciples Peter, John and James felt as they accompanied Jesus down that unnamed mountaintop? Did they think that 'it is all downhill from here'? Did they think the journey ahead would now be easy? Or perhaps they were saddened by the realization that it can't get much better than this? We don't know for sure. But if I were to speculate, I would say neither. The wonderful thing about mountaintop experiences, particular those in relationship to walking the way of God in obedience to the Lord, is that it does not cease.

We have seen this in the Scripture, in the history of Israel, as the people of God experienced their mountaintops. From Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1-14) to Moses receiving the call on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:1-14). From the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-18) to Elijah facing down 400 false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 King 18:20-40). From the twisted idolatry of Mount Samaria (1 Kings 12, 16) to the painful lesson learned on Mount Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:1-15). From the final battle between good and evil on Mount Megiddo (Ezekiel 39:1-6, Revelation 20:7-10) to the eschatological vision of Zion, the Holy mountain of God (Isaiah 11, 66). Perhaps later I will expand on these mountaintops in a sermon series. The point that I am making today is that the community of faith went from one high to a higher height, until that final consumption with the Lord God almighty.

It not always a straight line upward, there are lows and darkest valleys a, but even there, the "Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:1-4) Isn't it the same way with the disciples of Jesus? or with anyone who is willing enough and foolish enough to follow the way of God in Christ?

I shall leave with you a simple promise from the Lord, in Matthew 28, after issuing the Great Commission, Jesus said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.