

The View from the Top

A sermon by Keith Herron, Pastor, Holmeswood Baptist Church, Kansas City, Mo.
Transfiguration Sunday

Luke 9:28-36

February 10, 2013

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:3

Just prior to her fiftieth birthday, Julie Pennington-Russell, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur Georgia, decided to tackle a milestone challenge to go with her milestone year. It was a decadal war waged against the truthful mortality of her fifth decade of life. So she decided she would climb Atlanta's Stone Mountain once for every year of life ... fifty trips trudging up and down that great dome of granite. "50 X 50" we might call it.

She hiked in winter when the water pooled on the summit was covered in ice. She hiked in the oppressive summer heat when you could fry bacon on that big rock. She climbed at sunrise and at sunset and once under a full moon. She climbed alone, and often she climbed with friends, fellow church members, neighbors and even houseguests who accepted her challenge as their own in solidarity of her adventurous campaign. Imagine that, a year of climbing that great granite mountain as a way of marking time and adding perspective on her life!

What came as a surprise were the lessons she learned along the way. In an article first published by the *Atlanta Constitution-Journal* she wrote about three spiritual lessons she learned while climbing up and down Stone Mountain.

First, she found there's a BIG value in feeling small. Stone Mountain is an igneous intrusion five miles in diameter at its base. Stone Mountain formed as a result of the upwelling pressure of magma from within the Earth's crust millions of years ago. No one knows when this occurred but it would have been so long ago time

would necessarily be measured back to the dawn of time. There's nothing like the "dawn of time" to put your finitude in perspective. Whether you take the short, but direct route, or the longer easier route, to reach the summit you're going to climb vertically 825' from the base to the top. The immensity of the granite dome is striking because Stone Mountain towers over the neighboring communities of suburban Atlanta.

Second, she noted that "Everyone needs to stand on top of something." She believes "a mountain is a great metaphor for life." A climber has to sacrifice something to haul themselves up and down the mountain. There's the time it takes and the commitment to not quit after a few trips. The challenge of it can be daunting. She describes the day her husband's brother took his own life and when she reached the summit, she shook her fists in the air and shouted at death: You don't get the final word down here! She rightly observes that "in some mysterious way, my feet seemed planted not only on the crest of that mountain, but also on the neck of everything that wants to break us down here (including) depression, cancer, addiction and (even the inevitability of) death."

Third, she claimed some moments are meant to be savored, not just seized by the lapels. We are notorious for our capacity to hold worry within, driven by our addiction to work, overwhelmed by our obsessive lives. It's too much! When do we ever turn all that off and pay attention?

She described on one of her hikes in early spring, she hiked while talking on her cell phone fielding important calls that demanded her attention. When she reached the summit, she lay on her back breathing deeply and watched a red-tailed hawk circling in the wind currents high above her and she says she was sure she heard that hawk staring down at her asking, "What's the point of it all?"[\[1\]](#)

Roland McGregor says if you "find the glory, you'll find the worshiper."[\[2\]](#) The mountain is a sacred space is where heaven and earth meet; it's the space

between God and humankind, the place between Jesus' incarnation and his resurrection.^[3]

Most of us live so much of our existence in the valley of ordinary life we don't know much about what it means to occasionally venture up on the mountaintop. You see, we're not such extraordinary people that we should be able to live up on the heights where extraordinary things only happen to extraordinary people. After all, we're ordinary people living ordinary lives.

We're not super-humans; we're ordinary folks who go to bed tired in the evening after a long day of work. We're tall and we're short. We're both pretty and plain. None of us are too rich or too poor. Some have smarts about them while others make more dumb decisions than not. But most of us come from normal families of good, but ordinary, stock. You see, we're just a slice of pie. We're a "true sample" of what ordinary people are like. By and large, we're ordinary folks with a wide array of ordinary gifts and our experiences in life are mostly that ... ordinary.

So how do "ordinary folks" approach this extraordinary story of Jesus who stands on the top of a windy mountain and is a part of a very small audience to a special effects show that not even Hollywood could duplicate? What did it mean to Peter, James and John? What did it mean to Jesus? And what does it mean to us?

This is anything but an ordinary story. It's not an experience that many have ever claimed to have. This is an extraordinary experience the Bible only records in a few places. In this story, the actual presence of God comes face to face with our human experience and out of the sheer awe of the moment a man comes away glowing from the encounter.

We talk glibly about having mountaintop experiences in the church. But most of us remember sometime in the past when we've experienced *something* of the glory of God. Maybe it happened while you were at youth camp or at a revival and some deep sense of the divine jolted you with a sense of the presence of God so riveting and so engaging and so holy that your life was changed. Maybe you made your first commitment to Christ in a moment like that. You walked down an aisle

accompanied by long and stirring refrains of “Just as I Am” or “Softly and Tenderly” to which you made your first commitment to Jesus. I know that many of you have done that because I too have been moved by the Spirit of God to respond and I’ve heard many of you testify about the power of those kinds of experiences.

But I don’t recall being in a worship service where the Spirit moved and I looked over and saw someone in the service that had an encounter so real they were luminescent!

What is described in this gospel story is something extraordinary that we ordinary folks aren’t quite sure what to do with it. The three Synoptic gospels each tell with some slight variations, the story of how Jesus was transfigured and his body and his clothing shone with a radiant light. Literally in the Greek it says, “His appearance was changed;” the word transfigured comes from the word, *metamorphosis*, and a change in form.

Matthew says the face of Jesus shone “*like the sun*,” while his clothing became as “*white as the light*.” But in Luke, his face was altered and the disciples saw the divine glory in it. The glory of Christ is “*the true light*” that in John’s gospel “*enlightens everyone*.”

On the top of that mountain, Jesus discussed with Moses and Elijah what would be asked of him, namely, that he would be asked to sacrifice his life for the sins of the world. It’s a conversation about death and the riddle of his life is solved. There is no more mystery of what will come of him in his journey on the earth. Whatever he thought about the direction of his life, from this moment on, he knew he had come so he could follow God on the mission God had given him.

The twin messengers of the Hebrew Scriptures representing the Law and the Prophets are accompanied by the shining presence of God. Where there was once a need for a veil with Moses, there is now no need for a veil and the three disciples are left with their mouths open and the shining glow of being near to the presence of God.

The voice of God gave Jesus the strength to leave the mountaintop. Jesus knew that after the Transfiguration, he must head back down into the valley of human need. But before he left, God gave him bread for the journey. God spoke to the affirmation of his existence and gave him the blessing he needed in order to leave the mountaintop.

In her memoir, *Breathing Space*, Heidi Neumark writes about this day on the mountaintop and gives it meaning: “Living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of the transfiguration ... [it was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”^[4]

So today we’re standing on the cusp of Lent, a time of penitence and the remembrance of our mortality when we realize the world we live in is broken and needs our attention. And we remember that even though Jesus was swept away by the Spirit and engulfed in the cloud of God’s glory, when the moment of God’s glory passed, as all moments of glory do, Jesus and his wide-eyed friends went down the way they had come up, where they went back to work in the valley of need.

^[1] Julie Pennington-Russell, “Lessons from Stone Mountain,” *Baptists Today*, February 2013, originally published in the *Atlanta Constitution-Journal*

^[2] McGregor, Roland, *The McGregor Page*, Internet resource for lectionary, 2/22/98

^[3] Ian Curran, “Transformed,” *Christian Century*, 7/15/08

^[4] Heidi B. Neumark, *Breathing Space, a Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003