

Sermon
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West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Luke 9:28-36

One of my best friends in South Africa grew up on a wild life reserve. As students, we loved to go home with her for the weekend. On one such weekend we went for a hike up quite a steep hill. I was exhausted when we came to the top. I couldn't sit down quickly enough to just catch my breath and wipe the sweat out of my eyes.

But boy-o-boy, what I saw when I started looking around, is a picture I will never forget. It was just before dusk, my favourite time of the day, and as if they were all invited to a party, the animals started gathering together – giraffes, kudu, impala, wildebeest, rhinos, zebra – running and jumping, like my boys when they know they are going to get a treat! As far as the eye could see, there were wild animals. Usually they are very well camouflaged and you don't see them that easily, but because we were up high, it was as if I could see *everything* in the landscape below. All this with the sun starting to set in the distance, painting the landscape in front of me in all the different shades of red.

For a few moments it felt as if it was only me on earth, me and this amazing God who made everything I was looking at. I felt so close to God, it was as if He was showing me: "Look around you Nanda – I made

all this and I take care of it all. Just like I made you and take care of you too.”

That was my mountain-top experience. Literally on the top of a hill. I've had many other mountain-top experiences in my life as well – finally receiving my doctorate degree after working really hard for many years; saying “yes” to Andre in a wee church filled to the brim with family and friends; experiencing the miracle of life when my boys were born; being inducted as the minister of this charge.

Mountain-top experiences. Moments where I didn't only feel on top of the world, but could almost physically see the goodness of God in my life.

But then I've spent a fair share of time down in the valleys of life as well – spending countless hours next to my brother's hospital bed; losing my mum long before she could teach me how to be a mum myself; conducting funerals for people I got to know and love.

Nobody likes spending time in the valleys. But if I can be completely honest now – although I have felt alone, and isolated, and sad, and upset, I've never once felt that God has forgotten about me. Because he hasn't.

This is my story, a story you all know by now. But then, I know that all of you have similar stories - Stories about different ups and downs, but ups and downs none the less.

God is with us, in the highs and the lows. On the mountain-tops and in the valleys, whether we realize this or not. Maybe he even gives us the mountain-top experiences to give us the strength to get through the valleys...

In our Scripture reading, we heard about Jesus, Peter, John and James' mountain-top experience. Jesus took these 3 disciples up a mountain with him, and they got a glimpse of God.

What happened on that mountain-top is not easy to understand in our scientifically orientated society today, where visions and apparitions are easily disregarded as nonsense. But in the 1st century Mediterranean world, that was part and parcel of everyday life.

This episode happened after the disciples had a long conversation about who Jesus was.

They go up the mountain to pray. Why go up a mountain to pray? For obvious reasons – solitude, and also because they believed that God literally only stayed in heaven, so you were physically closer to him when you were somewhere high. Very often in the Old and New Testaments we read of people going up a mountain to pray. Places of worship were always built on mountain-tops in those days.

What they experienced up there was intense. Jesus prayed with all his heart. His appearance changed – it was as if the glory of God shone through him. This whole experience took so much out of the disciples, that they started to fall asleep. But then they had a vision of 2 significant

figures from the Old Testament appear there on the mountain with them – Moses and Elijah.

And this wee passage, a passage that we can easily disregard because we don't understand it, is actually very meaningful, and it says so much more than what we notice at first glance.

Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets – thus everything that was important to the people of God. Both Moses and Elijah had their own significant mountain-top experiences as well:

- Moses went up Mount Sinai, where God spoke to him face to face and gave him the Ten Commandments. When he came down again his face shone brightly.
- Elijah went up Mount Carmel, where the growing number of people who worshiped the false god Baal all experienced their god ignore their request to light their offering, but after Elijah prayed, God gave them a spectacular display of his might by lighting the Israelites' offering.

Mountain-top experiences.

Life changing events.

But then what happened?

Moses went down the mountain to find his people being untrue to God and praying to a golden calf they made.

Down the mountain straight into the valley.

Elijah went down the mountain and was confronted with Queen Jezebel's wrath. He made her look bad and she was ready to kill him –

so he had to flee into the wilderness.

Down the mountain and straight into the valley.

But in both cases we see that God isn't only on the mountain-tops, because he guided and guarded Moses and Elijah through their valleys as well. As a matter of fact, they had the courage to face up to what was happening in the valleys, because God strengthened their faith on the mountain-tops.

No matter what happened to them down below, they saw God on the mountain, and nothing could ever take that away from them. So even just the fact that they knew God existed, gave them the courage not to give up hope in seemingly hopeless situations.

Up on that mountain God revealed to Peter, John and James that Jesus was in fact his son, and that they had to listen to him. These people were really close to Jesus, and they knew he was no ordinary person, but they didn't yet completely understand who he was and what he had come to do.

But in true 1st century style, God himself tells them who Jesus is – his own Son. There were 3 of them there, to be able to each testify that this really happened. Nobody would believe one single person if he told them that this happened, but 3 was a significant number in those days – and because all 3 of them experienced the same thing, nobody would ever doubt that it actually happened.

Peter found this experience so life changing, he wanted to build tents and stay there. And who can blame him – wouldn't it be just amazing if all through our lives we had nothing but mountain-top experiences?!

But that's just not how life works; they had to go down again...

Straight from this mountain-top Jesus started his journey to Calvary. A valley darker than anything we'll ever have to experience. But because of his mountain-top experience, he had the courage to face death – for us.

Experiences like this are of course not limited to Biblical times. Just think of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr, for example. On the 3rd of April 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, he preached his famous sermon, entitled, "I see the Promised Land."

Martin Luther King said that he didn't worry about anything because he had been to the mountain-top with God. He said he had no fear, "For my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" The next day, he was shot dead. But that night when he preached, Dr King was ready to face his destiny. He was ready to face the future because he had been to the mountain-top with the Lord.

That's what mountain-top experiences in our lives are all about.

Mountain-top experiences help us to get ready for the tomorrows. They help us to face the future in the hope and assurance that God is there with us.

Mountain-top experiences also prepare us for the valleys in our lives. We are able to make it through the valleys, because like Martin Luther King, Jesus, Elijah, Moses, and so many others, we have been to the mountain-top with God.

So when you are in the valley of joblessness, or in the valley of loneliness, or in the valley of ill health, or in the valley of depression, or in the darkest of all valleys, the valley of the shadow of death – fear no evil, for the Lord is with you.

When you're on a mountain-top, and you can see *far* in the distance, you realize that the world is much bigger than just your own life. It gives you perspective.

That's the view God has of our lives all the time – even when we find ourselves in valleys where we can't see any further than our own sorrow. Let's remember that, trust God, and never lose hope.

Every now and again we are fortunate enough to get a glimpse of God in our everyday lives – let's go through life with open eyes, so we can recognise these moments for what they are, and then carry on knowing that even though it is sometimes hard to see God, he is always there.

Amen