

Sermon

10 June 2018

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Exodus 19:1-6

Matthew 22:34-40

If you have a choice – what route do you take: the easy or the hard one?

I think most people will probably choose the easy way, but not my son.

You see him standing there on top of that huge rock at North Berwick (*Photo on screen*). If we walk anywhere, he is never on the footpath with the rest of his family – he is *always* climbing onto something or over something. Come to think of it – he is like that in everything he does. He sometimes overthinks things so much that he makes his own wee life harder than it has to be.

And when I ask him WHY he doesn't just take the easy route like the rest of us, he'll say: "But mum, that's boring. It so much cooler up here!"

Fair enough, nothing beats a spectacular view!!

A good 20 years ago Andre and I climbed Dune 7, the highest sand dune in Namibia (*Photo on screen*).

It might not look very hard to climb, but for every step you take up you slide back at least half a step in the sand. We got up really early that morning to see the sun come up over the desert, so we were tired before we even started. And as you can imagine, my dear husband didn't get to the top of that dune without complaining. Very loudly! He almost gave up, but when I said that I didn't come all this way NOT to make it to the top and just left him behind, he quickly followed.

And he thanked me so much for motivating him, or in his words: "FORCING him" to climb all the way to the top, because seeing the sun rise over the desert from that angle was almost like watching God paint a canvas.

It was spectacular. Magical.

And then of course, after all the time it took us to get to the top, it literally only took minutes to get back down.

Climbing a rock, climbing a dune, climbing a mountain...

I think it's fair to say that you don't go up and come down exactly the same person. Especially not if you meet God at the top of that mountain, like Moses did in our reading!

God is everywhere, always. But somehow, I think we sometimes feel closer to him when we are in nature.

Especially after a long difficult walk up a mountain. If you then look down and around you at the beautiful landscape, and look up at the sky, it's almost as if you can physically feel God's grace embrace you...

Climbing a mountain changes you, it makes you grow a little.

Moses had to climb up Mount Sinai, in the desert, to receive the 10 commandments. The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt for a long time. They didn't have the opportunity to choose how they wanted to live, what they wanted to do.

But now they were free. They were free because God saved them. He "carried them on eagle's wings" – a beautiful metaphor describing just how much God did for them. When the journey was too hard to bear, he *carried* them to where they had to be.

But because the Egyptians always told them what to do and how to do it, they had never had to take care of themselves. So God laid down some rules to make it easier for them to know what to do and what not to do as a community: The Ten Commandments.

If they followed these rules they would be a people like no other – they would be the people of God. A people who let themselves be ruled by love, and nothing else. In our New Testament reading we heard Jesus give a summary of the Ten Commandments – love God and love your neighbour.

If you always do this – the whole world will know that you belong to God.

I came across a very fascinating description of the role something like the Ten Commandments play in people's lives. In his book: "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion", Jonathan Haidt uses a metaphor to describe how the *mind* works. He says it's like a rider on an elephant (*Photo on screen*):

The rider is our conscious reasoning – the ideas and images and words of which we are fully aware. The *elephant* represents all the rest of our mental capacity and processes that occur *without* our conscious awareness.

It is the elephant which actually steers most of our behaviour, and not the rider.

I don't know how many of you have actually seen elephants in the wild – but believe me when I tell you – an elephant is HUGE. No human will tell an elephant what to do and where to go if the elephant has a different plan...

So the way I see it is: The rules God laid out for his people in the Old Testament, the rules we live our lives according to laid out for us in the New Testament, is our elephant.

These precepts are not ones that need to be thought about actively each day to make sure that we are following their guidance. These rules form part of the unconscious part of our mental activity, that actually governs most of our behaviour.

For example: We do not have to consciously remember not to murder or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness, because that is not who we are.

Our elephant is love. If we believe in God, love should be what guides our every decision.

We shouldn't try to tell the elephant where to go – how ridiculous would that be? We shouldn't fight against who God made us to be; we should allow the elephant to lead us. We should allow the love of God to lead us. Because if we do that, we'll never end up in the wrong place.

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During the children's address we heard that, among other things, is very good at climbing mountains.

But his own journey to where he is now, was a steep one, not easy at all. He had to take some time out, he had to take some unexpected turns. But he realised that he just had to keep going, and now he is making a huge success of his life.

If he just jumped down from that balcony this morning, he might have hurt himself badly. But he didn't do that – he was sensible, he used all the right tools to help him to get to the bottom safely.

This morning during the children's address we heard that has steadily been climbing a metaphorical mountain all through his career. He's taken a few surprise twists and turns, but he kept going. It might

have been a long, steep climb, but he kept going, because he knew it would be worth it.

He used everything God gave him – his interests, his gifts, opportunities, as tools to climb his mountain safely.

Just like that God gives us all tools to help us safely through life. It is our choice whether we use these or not. But if we don't, we might end up getting hurt.

These tools are things like the Ten Commandments, the example of Jesus, God's Spirit living within us and guiding us.



Sometimes our lives can be a very steep and even scary climb. Sometimes it is impossible to even see the top of the mountain. Sometimes our foot slips, sometimes we get tired, sometimes we are not motivated enough, and sometimes the tears in our eyes make it very difficult for us to see where we should be going.

I'm sure you all know what I am talking about:

- Like when things are going quite well and suddenly something happens that throws you off balance completely.
- Or like when you have been struggling for so many years you feel as if your life consists of nothing but hardship.
- Or like when you are so alone you feel as if nobody understands you.

- When your health, your relationships, your career, your hobbies, your faith, fall to pieces.

In times like these – please remember: Don't give up. No matter how hard it is, this mountain called life is worth the climb. I believe the view from the top is more than breath-taking!

Use the tools God gives you. Follow the rules he has laid out for you. And allow him to carry you on his *eagle wings* when you just can't carry on yourself any more.

But don't ever give up. To be a Christian might mean that we are not always on the easiest route. But, in my son's words – it's so much cooler from up there!!

At the General Assembly the moderator spoke about her "fit-bit" – the wee device so many of us have around our arms or on our mobile phones to count how many steps we take each day. Most people have a specific target they want to reach each day, and they work hard at achieving it.

But then the moderator said something very important – and I would like to say that to all of you today: In your journey through life – don't only count your steps, but make your steps count!

To the glory of God.

Amen