

Lessons From Shenandoah: “Step UP”
Message for North East United Methodist Church
August 13, 2017
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

My family and I love to travel to the Shenandoah Mountains...Every summer, for years, we loaded up the camper and headed off for a week or more atop the mountains that tower over Luray, Virginia.



Up at Big Meadows, we set up camp and spend the week watching deer, skunks, and bear walk through our campsite...



Every day, after breakfast we head off to the many trails along the Skyline Drive to hike.

Many of the trails are a challenge...Mary's Rock, BearFence, Lewis Falls, Old Rag and Chimney Rock have us climb upward, and upward...over rock scrambles and ledges...



...to magnificent views. Many times, I am near the back of the group, out of shape...



...wondering if I can make it to the top. But I realize if I stop...if I fail to reach the top...I will miss out on the blessing...the view of the falls or the valley below...



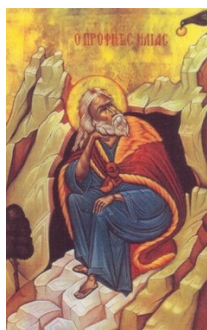
...the feel of God all around you...God's magnificence...His awesome power and majesty seen in creation...I realize I cannot stay where I am and experience all the mountain has to offer...all God created for me...

When hiking I focus on the next step...I focus on the next rock...the next hill...the next turn...and I simply "step up" and then I "step up" again...and before I know it I am looking down over the valley or hearing the rush of waters cascading over the rocks down into the gorge. Before I know it, I am seeing the face of God in His creation.

I want to get to the top of the mountain. I want to *"taste and see that the Lord is good."*



It was on top of Mount Sinai that God spoke to Moses...Exodus 19: 3-6 (NIV) – *"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain..."*



Elijah met God on top of Mount Horeb...I Kings 19: 11-13 (NIV) – *"The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then*

a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.”

And the Disciples had an extraordinary, intimate moment with Jesus atop Mount Tabor...



Matthew 17: 1-7 (NIV) - *After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light...”*

The Transfiguration...

Jesus invites us to walk with Him up the mountain...to “step up” onto the mountaintop and into the presence of God...

Before we do anything else, we must “step up” into God’s presence.

Isn’t this the lesson Jesus taught Martha? Luke 10: 38-42 (NKJV) - *Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.” And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”*

“But ONE THING is needed, and Mary HAS CHOSEN that good part.”

Jesus told us, in **Matthew 6:33 (NKJV)**, ***“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”***

I wonder if James gave any thought to the moment he was with Peter and John atop the mountain with Jesus...if James thought about the transfiguration along with the many other miracles and moments he had witnessed and experienced with Jesus...when God spoke through his pen...and gave us the greatest invitation ever given...

James 4:8 - “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”

John Bevere, in his book, *Drawing Near*, writes, “Stop a moment and ponder this: the Creator of the universe, the earth, and all its inhabitants, requests your presence. Not only your presence, but He desires to be intimately close, for we are told (Exodus 34:14) “He is a God who is passionate about His relationship with you.””

Jesus paid a huge price to pave the way for you to have a personal relationship, a close relationship with God. “However,” as Bevere writes, “this reunion of God and man has not been preached nor experienced in its fullest extent. We’ve emphasized the liberation from sin and death [salvation], but neglected to declare the intimate fellowship awaiting all who’ve been made free. This neglect is costly, and even disastrous, as so many miss the beauty of knowing God intimately.”

God wants you to climb up the mountain...to climb into His presence...God wants you to “step up”...

It is only by “stepping up” that we experience God...that we draw close to Him...that we begin to know Him...whether it is in a thunderclap, a still, small whisper, or a moment of dazzling light...

Bevere writes, “Many have settled for the intellectual knowledge of belonging without ever pursuing the reality of interaction with Him in the moment. So deeply embedded is the concept of salvation that few go any further. They’ve said their prayers and will one day die and go to be with Him. Yet, the reality of Christ is missed, and the powerful revelation of God’s desire to walk with us is lost. It is not a one time or far away experience, but His real desire is abiding communion.”

In other words, God wills that we should “Step Up”...”Step Up” into His presence...

Bruce Wilkinson tells story...man gets to heaven...warehouse...boxes each with ribbon and name...”Do I have one of these boxes?”...Peter says “Yes, but I wouldn’t look.”...in the box the man finds all the blessings God wanted to give Him but He did not seek after them...did not open...

Bevere writes, “The baffling question is: Why do so many believers have a shallow relationship with God? Why don’t they delve into a deeper, more consistent relationship with Him? What holds them back? What would ignite and cause them to respond to His call to draw near? The answer is not complex: it’s our hunger and thirst to know Him. David cried out, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.””

“Why do so many believers have a shallow relationship with God?” One answer can be found in Proverbs 27:7 reads, “A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb.”

In other words, “if your soul is filled with cares, pleasures, the love of riches, or the desires of this world, you’ll be full and actually despise the sweet honeycomb of God’s fellowship...”

(John Bevere, Drawing Near).

We must be intentional about “stepping up” into God’s presence, climbing the mountaintop and spending time with God...or we will find ourselves staying below, surrounded and satisfied with the things of this world...satisfied with “stepping around”

Understand that you and I will hunger for what we feed on...we feed on chocolate, we will crave more...we feed on sports, we will crave ESPN...we feed on movies, we will wait on the edge of our seat for the next big attraction...we feed on hunting, we will jump out of bed at 4 am to go sit in the cold and freeze for that one chance...we feed on cars, we will talk shop whenever we are with others...we feed on money, we will always be talking and worrying about it...we feed on material possessions, we will be looking for every opportunity to shop...

I am sure many of you can relate...I know I can...I so often feed on things of this world... movies, books, vacations, hunting, money...the list goes on-and-on...and in doing so, time with God gets pushed aside...God is no longer the priority...

If we feed on the things of God, we will hunger more and more for Him...It has been those seasons of my life when I was involved in a small group, when I was studying the scriptures each day and meeting with others to discuss and to pray...or I was involved in Disciple Bible Study or Experiencing God...or an Emmaus weekend...it was during these seasons in which I sought after God passionately that I came to know God more intimately, felt His presence more visibly, experienced Him personally...I can look back and remember the mountaintop experiences I had with God during those times in my life...

Charles Stanley offers three practical steps for “stepping up” and spending time on the mountaintop with God. I share these steps in this week’s devotion as well...

First, Stanley tells us to **Schedule Time With God**.

How many times have you told someone, “Hey, let’s get together” only to never follow through. When one is serious about getting together with someone, you make an appointment. Each night when you go to bed decide on a time and place to be alone with God the next day...a time and place to refuel. Write it down in your planner, on your calendar...make a note and then follow through.

Secondly, Stanley says one needs a place that is off the beaten path of your daily activities... **Choose A Place Where The Only Thing You Do There Is Meet With God**.

This spot will take on special significance and being there will affect your mood and ability to concentrate.

Lastly, **Use A Variety Of Methods**.

Stanley suggests a devotional book...when that becomes stale...journal your thoughts and prayers...if you are on a Bible reading plan taking you through the scriptures...switch it up

one day and focus on one book of the Bible...Stanley writes, *“This is a relationship. Look for ways to keep it fresh.”*

One person I read, Kenneth Boa pulls no punches in stating that it is *“absurd to think that we could excel at any sport such as golf or tennis without investing the needed time, training, and practice. But when it comes to living the Christian life, we suppose that we are doing well if we attend church and open a Bible once or twice a week. If believers expended the same time and energy cultivating their spiritual lives as they are willing to invest in becoming reasonably skillful at any sport or hobby, the world would look with wonder at the power of the body of Christ. We desire to know Christ more deeply, but we shun the lifestyle that would make it happen.”*

We cannot truly experience the mountaintop...come into the presence of God...without climbing...without “stepping up”...

We must make a commitment to climb into His presence...



Believe it or not that’s me “rock climbing” Little Stoney Man in Shenandoah two years ago...

...commit to “step up” out of the everyday and the world that surrounds you into God’s light... commit to sitting down with your Heavenly Father each day and allow Him to fill you, to quench your thirst...

What will God do? God will, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, *“... fill you will all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

What will God do? God will, as spoken through the prophet, in Isaiah 40 – *“give power to the weak and strength to the powerless”...will “...renew their strength” and cause them to “...soar on wings like eagles...run and not grow weary...walk and not be faint.”*

What will God do? God will, a Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, *“...supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.”*

One lesson drawn from the wilderness and mountaintops of Shenandoah...

“Draw near to God” ...STEP UP...”and He will draw near to you.”