

Lessons from Shenandoah: “Step Down”
Message for North East United Methodist Church
August 20, 2017
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

When my family and I travel every summer to the mountains of Shenandoah, we know we are getting close when we hit the town of Sperryville, Virginia. Then it is onward and upward, the road winding around and through the mountains to Thornton Gap, the entrance to the Skyline Drive...



Then it is onward and upward again, for an hour, to the top of the mountain and Big Meadows...



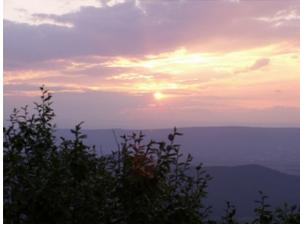
We finally arrive at the top of the mountain with breathtaking views...and each day we hike to overlooks even more magnificent...



Bear Fence, Little Stoney Man, Old Rag, and Hawksbill...



Often...after hiking for an hour or more we come out of the woods to a rock outcropping overlooking the valley and God's magnificence...God's majesty...lays before us...



After we have sat atop the mountain for awhile, watching the sunrise or sunset over the surrounding mountains, the peregrine falcons fighting in air, the Shenandoah River as it travels below through the valley...someone says, "It's time to go" and often, I want to stay...I don't want to "step down"...it is hard to come down off the mountain...

It is even more difficult at the end of the week, to get in the car and drive down the mountain, back through Thornton Gap, and down into Sperryville toward home...I dread leaving the mountain, coming back down into the valley...I want to stay atop God's creation...where I feel close to Him...where there are no problems, issues, headaches...no bills, meetings, arguments...no news, wars, poverty...just beauty...just peace...just God and family...

I understand...perhaps just a bit...how Peter must have felt at the Transfiguration...



...the moment, atop the mountain, with James and John, he saw Jesus transfigured before him, shining like light itself, talking to Moses and Elijah...the day, God spoke, "*This is my beloved Son...*"

Matthew 17: 1-3 – Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

It was then Peter spoke up...

Matthew 17: 4 – Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Peter wanted to build three tabernacles...



A tabernacle was a tent sanctuary used by the Israelites during the Exodus...it was a place of worship...



...it was also a dwelling place, a temporary shelter, where they slept on those wilderness nights as they made their way to the Promised Land...

But while Peter was speaking...

Matthew 17: 5-9 - *While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."*

God interrupted any thought of building three tabernacles atop the mountain...and after God spoke and Peter and the other disciples fell to the ground in fear and awe of God, Jesus touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." Arise. And they "came down from the mountain."

Now I am sure Peter and the other two disciples would have liked to stay atop the mountain for awhile...to bask in the experience of God they just witnessed...to reflect on the words they heard God speak...to perhaps see Jesus once more transfigured before them...light and love...the Savior...to worship and look out upon God's majesty...

Peter knew what awaited him and the others in the valley...just as I know every year when we pull out of Big Meadows and head down the mountain road toward home...Peter knew the world below was filled with sufferings and trials, war and hunger, sickness and death...Jesus even told Peter, James & John as they descended from the mountain, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead." Which meant that Jesus was going to die?

I believe Peter probably wanted to stay on the mountaintop for awhile...

Don't we all want the same...We experience God in our lives...we invite Him in and experience His forgiveness and love...we feel His presence in our lives and grow close to others who profess His name...and we want to hold on to how we feel in God's presence...we want to hold on to the moment so we build tabernacles where we will spend our time...where we are comfortable...where we don't have to face the problems below in the valley and can stay in the presence of God...worshipping and praising Him and fellowshiping with others who also believe...where we can insulate ourselves from the outside...from the problems of the world and from ourselves...

And they *"came down from the mountain."*

But what we fail to understand is that (1) There is no life on top the mountain; and (2) Our mission exists in the valley.

First, **There Is No Life On Top The Mountain.**

As we hike to the top of the mountains each summer, the trees begin to thin out the higher we go, the animals become scarcer, the vegetation becomes sparser...



...Up at the top where the wind blows violently and the weather attacks, there is little growing...we usually climb across rocks and boulders, void of any life...

The life...the forest growth...is below...in the valley...on the hillsides...

Jesus understood this...He understood that life was in the valley...life for all who would believe...eternal life...for it was in the valley he had to go...it was in the valley...toward Jerusalem...that he would travel...he would make His way to the cross...Jesus could not stay on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah...He could not stay in His glory...God had simply given Him a glimpse of what was to come...the end of the story...to give Him strength for the journey ahead, for the cross and the nails and the crown of thorns...Jesus understood He needed to go through the valley



...and take the long, dusty road to the cross if we were to have life, if our shackles were to be loosened, if our sins were to be forgiven...if the doors of heaven were to be opened, Jesus understood He had to go through the valley...

It is the same with us...if we are to become men and women of God, we, too, have to “step down” from the mountaintop and journey into the valley...It is in the valley, with all its sufferings and trials that we are molded and our faith is strengthened...it is in the valley that we grow in our relationship with God, we learn to lean on Him, trust Him, love Him...

As Paul writes, in Romans 5: 3-5 (Amplified Bible), ***“Moreover [let us also be full of joy now!] let us exult and triumph in our troubles and rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that pressure and affliction and hardship produce patient and unswerving endurance. And endurance (fortitude) develops maturity of character (approved faith and tried integrity). And character [of this sort] produces [the habit of] joyful and confident hope of eternal salvation. Such hope never disappoints or deludes or shames us, for God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us.”***

It is our trials, our sufferings, in the valley, that turn us to God...and when we turn to God we grow...Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3: 16-18 (The Message) what happens when we turn to God - *“Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone...Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.”*

...through our trials we do the hard work of becoming the man or woman God created us to be...focusing our thoughts upward...fighting those attitudes and actions within us that are not Christ-like...It is in the valley that we learn to trust God...work on our relationships with God and others...learn how to serve, how to love like Christ...

Peter, James and John had so much more to learn...they had further to grow...God was not done with them...God knew Peter, James, and John still needed to be molded...built up...taught...helped along...shown and put through things...so they might become more like His Son, Jesus... And they *“came down from the mountain”*...

Secondly, we come down off the mountaintop...because...

Our Mission Exists In The Valley.

Not only must we come down off the mountaintop, into the valley, to find God in the midst of our trials, to grow in our faith, to become the men and women God created us to become... but we must also come down off the mountaintop because there are people that need us...there are people that need what we have found...what we have seen...there are people that need Jesus.

This is depicted so well in Raphael's painting, "Transfiguration."

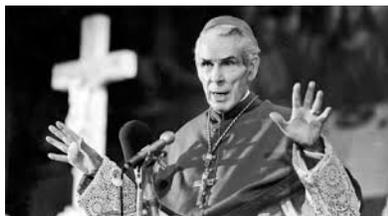


In the painting, Jesus, Moses and Elijah are floating above the three disciples, Peter, James, and John who are below the feet of Christ, prostrated in fear. But below the mountaintop are crowds of people including the epileptic boy that Jesus healed, after coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration. One of the people on the ground, perhaps a disciple, is pointing upward, to Jesus at the top of the mountain, sending the message that He is the answer...He is the One who can heal.

...we are to come down off the mountain & share the answer with them...the answer we've discovered...Jesus! Paul tells us we are "*Christ's ambassadors*"...that God is "*making his appeal through us.*"

Jesus speaks to us, "*Do you love me? Feed my sheep.*" Jesus says, "Don't just tell me you love me...show me...Show me by feeding, caring, and loving my 'sheep,' my children." David Humpal writes, "*Let us not neglect our responsibility in caring for the family of God. We must be willing to minister to hurts, to encourage the disheartened, to pray for those who are sick, to help the needy, and to reach out to those who are drifting away. Let us never neglect the job that the Lord has given us to tend the sheep. We must not only care about them, but we must also take care of them.*" We are called to serve, to put our "love" for God into action by loving His people.

One day Fulton Sheen, the famous Catholic bishop...



...was in a leper colony over in Africa, and he was repulsed by these open cancerous, cankerous sores on the lives of everybody laying there in the dirt. And he walked by one man laying there. He not only had leprosy, but he had a bunch of other skin diseases too, and open wounds on his legs. And as Fulton Sheen leaned over to talk to him, the cross that he was wearing on a chain around his neck broke. The chain broke and it fell into that open wound. He said, *“You know, for a minute I was just repulsed. I wanted to just kind of step back. And then all of a sudden I was filled. I was overcome for this love for this person who had nothing.”* He said, *“I reached into the sore and I took up the cross.”*

That is what Christianity is all about. It is about healing broken, messed up lives.

We are called to come down off the mountain & reach out to the many people in the crowds below...many who are hurting, lost, sick, guilt-ridden, poor, angry...

Often we as Christians, insulate ourselves from ourselves...we cover over the hurts and pains, problems and guilt...we cover our true selves with fake smiles and nice clothes...we keep busy in the church, doing good and focusing on others, so we don't have to face our own personal issues...we don't have to think about them...We build a tabernacle around us so we don't have to deal with the many issues within, in the valley of our past, our mind, our hearts...We change very little over the years...we bury our hurts and guilt...we rationalize our behavior...

Often we as Christians, we as the Church, fail to enter the valley...we insulate ourselves in our church buildings, our tabernacles, praising God, expecting the people in the valley to come to us...we insulate ourselves from the problems and sufferings of the world, comfortable and content amidst our friends and comrades in Christ.

God reaches down to us and says, *“Arise, and do not be afraid”* and leads us down the mountain to grow and learn, to serve and love, to do the hard work...the hard work within the valleys of our hearts...the hard work within the valleys of our community and world.

Ask God to lead you through the valleys to resurrection, to new life.

Ask God to help you trust Him on the journey, to help you deal with the deep issues, the areas of your life that are not Christ-like...Ask God to help you learn and grow through the difficulties you face.

And pray that God will show you where to go, who to tell about Jesus...that God will lay names on your heart that you can call, pray with, talk to...that God will give you the words and strength to be His ambassador...that God will help us as a church go out those doors to those throughout our community, ministering to them where they are instead of waiting for them to come to us...

I know what it is like to want to stay on the mountaintop...to be comfortable...but there is no life atop the mountain and our mission is in the valley...Christ calls us to come down...to travel the road to the cross...and at the end of that road...we will find that God will have molded us more into the likeness of His Son...that God will have shown us time and time again that He can be trusted...that His grace is sufficient...that God will have filled us with His love and His Holy Spirit...

And not only will God do these things for us, but also for those whom we share Christ with...

Let's look up and like the disciples, let us only see Jesus...and let us take His hand...



...Let us "STEP DOWN, following Jesus down the mountain and into the valley..."