

“Three Rules of Mountaineering”

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Texts: Matthew 4: 1-11 and Genesis 12: 1-9

Perhaps you'll recall these words from the last speech of Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr.:

I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

Dr. King believed he had been up the mountain and had seen the promised land. Maybe you have had a mountaintop experience as well. In fact, I hope you've had several opportunities in your life to be atop a mountain and looked at the world around you with awe and wonder. Believing and trusting that indeed the promised land can be seen. Joy can be experienced. Hope abounds. There's majesty and wonder at the top of a mountain. Many of us want to stay there, to exist there, indeed, to dwell there. Because we know that at the base of the mountain things don't look as awesome. We forget what it took to get up that mountain in the first place. Today, as we begin to embark on the next section of Daniel Cooperrider's book *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You*, we learn

the rules of mountaineering. They are true in actual mountain climbing, and I submit to you that they may also be true in the climbing of mountains we do all the time.

“Mountains are edge experiences. They bring us to the vertical edge of this world, and perhaps also to an edge or boundary of the self. Mountains have long been thought to be where gods dwell” (Cooperrider, 56). Getting up the mountain, however, can be difficult. “In addition to the existential difficulty that mountains pose, there are also the physical difficulties to consider. Going up a mountain challenges the human body, puts it in abnormal positions, and strains it beyond everyday motions. It requires stamina and energy and determination. It requires you to push through discomfort and exhaustion until you reach your second, third, fourth winds. Not only do you have to lift your body upwards, pushing against gravity and the hardness of the mountain, but you have to do so while cautiously, but confidently placing each foot on wobbly and erratic rock, slippery tree roots, or cold mountain streams. And in the back of your mind, you ponder the fact that every year, hundreds of people meet their end in the mountains” (Cooperrider, 57). Makes you wonder why anyone would attempt such a feat!

Daily life mountains are no less treacherous. Maybe it is the mountain we must climb with our doctors and nurses to deal with a medical condition. Maybe it is the mountain we must climb when embroiled in conflict – especially conflict within families. Maybe it is the mountain of financial struggle. All these mountains are just as difficult to climb. I wonder if they are even more difficult? But each of these mountains does have a peak – a place where we find a solution, or at least we find peace amid the problems. We all need a reminder that to climb any mountain – literal or metaphorical – requires that one passes through a great ordeal. “We most fully realize ourselves on the top of a mountain when the journey there has tested us. The climbing community summarizes the physical and spiritual difficulty that mountains pose with a maxim known as the three rules of mountaineering: ‘It’s always farther than it looks. It’s always taller than it looks. It’s always harder than it looks’ (Cooperrider, 57).

Before we explore each rule, I want to take you into the Bible as in our Bible “mountains are often celebrated as the beautiful dwelling place of the Divine and awesome marvels of creation.” When we climb the mountains of life, some even believe that we can know God is with us when we have reached the mountaintop. I want to challenge that notion as I believe that God is just as much in the valley (and maybe even more so!) than on the mountain. God is

immediately accessible, open, welcoming, loving, caring...whatever we need to make the journey from the valley to the top of the mountain. Stuck in base camp, God is with us. Our Bible tells us directly of great things on the mountain – like the transfiguration, the giving of the ten commandments, and so forth – but mountains are also the places of the near sacrifice of Isaac, Jesus' temptation, and Elijah facing earthquake, thunder and existential shudder while huddled in a cave on the side of Mount Horeb. No matter what is ahead in the mountains of our lives, it's important that we start climbing. Let's look at the rules.

Rule #1 – It's Always Farther Than It Looks.

In our scripture for today, Abraham is told to leave everything he knows and go to a new place and begin again. The promises to him are amazing, but getting there takes several chapters of the book of Genesis. Along the way, Abraham is pushed to climb Mount Moriah, which was a three-day journey, and then there he was told to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Imagine yourself as Abraham. He must travel three days into the unknown, fully packed with everything he needs to make a sacrificial altar. Genesis 22: 4 tells us that "Abraham looked up and saw the place far away." Cooperrider tells us that, "far is an apt metaphor for the human mind trying to bridge the gap and

understand the nature and way and sometimes baffling summons of God” (Cooperrider, 58). How many times in your life have you been trudging up your mountain only to ask God, “Why?” And then to live with the discomfort when the answer doesn’t come right away. Far, indeed, and often our journeys are much longer and much harder than we imagine, even with God at our side.

Rule 2 – It's Always Taller Than You Think

I know this firsthand from Michigan hills, let alone mountains. I’ve hiked Deadman’s Hill many times since moving here. Usually, I start by going down the long pathway into the Jordan Valley from the parking lot. This week, I went the other direction, and in my seventh mile of hiking, I climbed the hill I thought I knew. Sure, I knew it hiking down. It’s a good half mile going up. I never thought it was that far. It is.

Thinking back, there are many times I thought a mountain in my life was relatively easy to climb. I’d solve the problem with a few months of spiritual study, or mental health therapy, or medication. And then the problem would go away. I remember one time I was meeting with a therapist, bemoaning that I seem to confront the same issues over and over again in myself. He said that I was right, but I was also wrong. He drew a cylinder shape and talked about as we

move “up” in life (if you will) we do keep encountering some similar issues. At the same time, we also have learned new skills to name the situation, and to deal with it in new ways. If you follow, we are ascending, but we do encounter some of the same aches and pains along the way. Only now are we higher, we have more ground behind us, we have more tools in our toolbox. Lama Rinpoche shares with us the deep Zen wisdom of the Himalayan Mountain monks, who have a mantra to help resist the temptation to claim ultimate attainment and final accomplishment: “When you get to the top of the mountain, keep climbing”.

Rule 3 – It's Always Harder Than You Think

I know it's not our scripture for today, but I invite you to look at the book of First Kings. In 1 Kings 18, we read the story of the great prophet, Elijah enduring the most difficult day and night of his life. Cooperrider tells it this way:

After triumphing over the prophets of Baal during a duel on Mount Carmel, and after summoning a rain cloud to end the draught that was crippling the land, Elijah, expecting a heroes' welcome, runs down Mount Carmel in glee. Shortly thereafter, he receives word that Queen Jezebel wants him not welcomed, but killed for his triumph. Overcome with despair, Elijah journeys alone into the desert. Falling on his knees under broom tree, he asks God to take his life. Revived in the night by an angel of God, Elijah flees, for forty days, further into the wilderness and seeks refuge in a cave on the side of Mount Horeb. Elijah hears God's voice come to him in the mountain cave. 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

God invites Elijah to stand at the entrance of the mountain cave and look out.

The mountain throws everything that it can at the prophet. Wind rips through rock. The tectonic plates that formed the mountain rub and rumble, suggesting that just as the mountain has been made, so too it can be unmade. Elijah hears “a still small voice.” He hears “the sound of sheer silence,” “a thin quiet sound,” as different translations put it.

God again calls to the prophet with the same piercing, halting, soul-shuddering question as before: “What are doing here, Elijah”

Elijah was at his breaking point. He wanted to hide in the cave and wait it out, hoping his problems would go away. Often, I think we, too, want to avoid life’s mountains. We think of them too hard, too high, too far, or just plain too much. It’s much easier to stay atop a mountain, or even to descend one, than it is to go up. We try everything to avoid it. And yet, climb we must. Climbing mountains takes us to the edge of our physical and spiritual abilities. Hiding from them doesn’t make them go away. And so, we are called to climb. One step at a time, trusting that God makes a way where there seems to be no way (ask Abraham), God meets us when we’re at our worst (ask Elijah), and God carries us (ask Jesus). God doesn’t give you these mountains, life does. God does give you the courage, the stamina, the strength, to do far more than you imagine you can do. One step at a time.

When we arrive, we can see the promised land. It’s not the end of the story. We keep climbing. It’s always farther than it looks, it’s always taller than it

looks, and it's always harder than it looks, but that doesn't mean it cannot be done. Keep on climbing.

In the many names of God. Amen.