**“The Living Mountain”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts:  Exodus 3: 1-12 and Exodus 34: 1-9

As a young man filled with angst over his people being subjected to indentured servitude in Egypt and filled with longing to discover his life’s purpose, one day Moses ventured a bit further afield while tending to his father-in law’s flock of sheep.  (Daniel Cooperrider, *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You, p67)*

Have you ever been to that place?  You know, caught between a rock and a hard place?  Struggling with anxiety, fear, frustration, anger at something larger than you that you cannot seem to fix.  At the same time trying to figure out your own life’s purpose?  We think that the latter is something only young people do, but I believe more and more than figuring out our lives’ purpose can happen many times over a lifetime.   For Moses, he went further into the wilderness than he was used to, and he found himself at the base of Mount Horeb.  Mount Horeb is also known in scripture as Mount Sinai, and today it is called Jebel Musa (Arabic: “Mount Moses”).  Our Bible has many intense and awesome events that happen on or near mountains.  Much of the book of Exodus is a playing out of what begins here in this place.  Where is the place you encounter God?

Theologian Belden Lane, when speaking of Mount Sinai, says this:

It is an iconic “fierce landscape”.  The God of Sinai is one who thrives on fierce landscapes, seemingly forcing God’s people into wild and wretched climes where truth must be absolute.  (Cooperrider, 68)

While it is possible for God to speak to us in our places of comfort, I’ve found that I am most sure that God is speaking when I’m in turmoil, or times of great challenge, whether mental, physical, spiritual, or emotional.  I encounter God when I’m doing something else, or when my resources are at their limit.  My years in the Living School taught me that often we must let go in order to encounter God.  It is the case that God shows up when I’m not sure I can.  Even when things are going well, I still find that I encounter God amid other things.  It’s kind of like God shows up and I’m blind to the presence because I’m looking for or at something else.

The same is true for Moses.  We’re not sure why we went that far out.  Maybe better grazing land or something, but there he was and suddenly he was astonished to spot a bush that appeared to be burning.  Upon further investigation, he finds that it is burning, but it’s not.  “He marvels that the bush burns but remains unconsumed, more like a steady oil lamp than an ash-heaping brushfire.  God calls to Moses from that oil-lamp bush.  God stops the young man in his  tracks with a call to reverence and attention.  Moses takes his shoes off, for the ground he is standing on is “holy ground.”   “On the side of the mountain,” writes Daniel Cooperrider, “Hashem (otherwise known as YHWH or Yahweh) introduced God’s self to Moses and gave the young man insight into his life’s purpose – he was put here on this earth to free his people from Egypt, and then lead them to the promised land in Israel.  Excited at this high purpose calling, Moses was also hesitant when faced with the enormity of the task” (Cooperrider, p68-69).

Our life’s purpose often seems overwhelming.  That’s why we often deny it.  Right away, Moses does what we often do.  He wonders aloud if anyone will follow him.  Is he up to the task?  Can he really do this?  I don’t know about you, but I tend to do this questioning way more than once.  I question at the outset if this is a good idea, and when the going gets rough, I question it again.  In truth, I question myself.  Am I enough?  Can I really do this?  If this is so hard, is it really the right thing to do?  Isn’t there an easier way?  Maybe someone else is better equipped than I am?  And on and on and on.

Cooperrider tells us that, “Many times I’ve gone to the mountains feeling jaded and confused by life and the world.  Many times, I’ve returned with both my sense of amazement and my sense of direction renewed.  Mountains quicken our wonder and clarify our purpose” (Cooperrider, 69).  Since moving to Gaylord, I’ve found one trail that does this for me every time I go.  It’s the Warner Creek trail between here and East Jordan.  It all started when I first arrived in Gaylord and got COVID (somehow!) and was low about whether I could be a good pastor for this church.  Many people helped me through that time, including Rokko, and I appreciate it.  One call I made was to my family and I was a mess.  I’d done it all wrong.  What I was so clear about was now in jeopardy.  I was sick, lonely, hurting, frustrated...you name it!  After listening to me for some time, my sister-in-law said, “You need to take a hike.”  She knew I needed to get out of the house, see something different, and maybe she knew I needed physical activity.  For whatever reason, she told me to go, and I did.

Warner Creek isn’t the most beautiful trail in Northern Michigan, but it’s not ugly either.  It’s not the most difficult trail, but it’s not simple.  It’s not the longest trail, but it is four miles around.  For me, though, it became and has remained, my Mount Sinai.  In the middle section, after trudging through some swampy areas, and then a small field, one enters into what I call “the cathedral”.  Clearly, it is not the only wooded land with a trail in it around Northern Michigan.  But for me, it soars into the sky.  The sun barely breaks through, but where it does, it’s magnificent, like it had shone through stained glass windows.  The trail slowly rises and then has a rather large ascent.  Sometimes I’ll just stand there.  Yes, sometimes I sing, or pray, or speak aloud, or whatever.  For some reason, this particular trail, in this particular forest, in this particular spot, is my Mount Sinai. Without exception, I can find myself again, realign to my purpose, and find strength I didn’t have.  I pray you have a similar place where you can be reoriented to who you are and what you are called to do and to be.

Scottish modernist writer and poet Nan Shepherd (1893-1981) was born, lived and died in the Scottish Highlands outside of Aberdeen, on the north side of the River Dee as it makes its way from the Cairngorm Mountains to the North Sea.  She produced what I’m told is a stunning literary work called *The Living Mountain*.  I hope to see it soon.  The purpose of the work is to see creation as the theater of God’s glory (Cooperrider, 69).  Daniel Cooperrider shares with us more about this work:

Nan Shepherd’s approach to writing in *The Living Mountain* reflects her approach to hiking.  “At first,” she writes, as a young woman, ‘mad to recover the tang of height, I made always for the summits, and would not take time to explore the recesses.”  *The Living Mountain* tells the story about how, over time, her approach to “hill-walking” developed and matured beyond the fixation with altitude and peaks.

...Rather than making for the summits, Nan explores the mountains more aimlessly, with serendipity and curiosity leading the way as she wanders deep into the recesses, the plateaus, the lakes and streams of the hills.  For her, the pilgrim’s method of circumambulation, peregrination, Kora, replaces the mountaineer’s technical, competitive, linear summit fever.  “Often the mountain gives itself most completely,” she writes, “when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him.”  (Cooperrider, 70-71).

I wonder what we might learn from Nan and from her experience?  Maybe we, too, need to meander a bit more, and not just make a break for the summit.  God invited Moses to worship on the same mountain where they met and three months later, after trial and danger, after plagues and battles and the Red Sea parting, he led the people out of Egypt and through the wilderness, back to Jebel Musa where they were able to set up a safe and remote base camp and pause for a bit to regroup.  Lots to pull apart there, but I’ll leave that to you.  This life journey is full of starts and stops, places to rest and times to ascend.  It also has with it times to descend, times to regroup, and times to reorient.  The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “There’s a time for everything under heaven.”  I guess it’s really true.  I just wish I could better live that way.  By the way, Moses went up and down that mountain at least eight times.

Put succinctly, “The thought is that bewilderment and wordless wonder, not clarity and certainty, grow as we move closer to the absolute mystery of God. The final moment of encounter is beyond understanding.  “The divine is there,” Gregory of Nyssa writes about Moses on the mountain, “where understanding does not reach.”

I want to end with some words from Nan Shepherd, as recorded by Daniel Cooperrider:

That the mountain is not just the peak but the rivers and the air and the wildflowers and the animals and the people and the sky and the valley and on and on.  The “total mountain, slowly I’ve found my way in... It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation.  The many details – a stroke here, a stroke there – come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.  To know Being (she writes in her last sentence), is the final grace accorded from the mountain.

Mystery deepened.  Being graced.  Wonder peaked.  Wherever your mountain is

 and all along the way.  Let yourself be caught up in the wonder and the mystery.  Who knows?  You just might encounter God, too.

In the many blessed names of God.  Amen.