

## **Journey to the Mountaintop and Back Again**

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

Mount Everest. Denali. Matterhorn. K2, Mont Blanc. Mount Kilimanjaro. All of these are among the world's hardest mountains to climb. Ask anyone who has climbed a mountain and they will attest to the fact that it is not easy. A quick Google search of "toughest mountains to climb" will come up with story after story of the most treacherous slopes on some of the world's tallest, scariest mountains. It will tell you the death tolls on each of the mountains, and the percentage of people who have actually made it to the summit. What these lists don't tell you is how life-changing climbing a mountain can be.

An article on "*Greatist*," a website dedicated to helping people find a balance of being happy and being healthy, made it clear why climbing a mountain can be life-changing. In her article "I Climbed Kilimanjaro and All I Got Was a Life-Changing Experience," Nicola Korzenko reflects on the things she learned along the way to the summit of that famous mountain in Tanzania. Her reflections have titles such as these: "Be Deliberate — The Route You Choose Matters"; "A Little Research (Probably) Never Killed Anyone"; "Slow and Steady Wins the Race"; "Listen to Your Body"; "Oh Man, the Earth Is Kind of Amazing"; "The Mountain Is in Your Mind."

The last one, "The Mountain Is in Your Mind," may be the most interesting of all her reflections.

Korzenko writes about how summiting the “mountain in the head” is the hardest part of climbing, and how too often it stands in the way of being able to physically climb to the top of the mountain. She explains how the last 10 hours before summiting the mountain are brutal as you only sleep for a few hours and climb to the summit and back down in one day.

That day is like climbing a mental mountain. Your body is already exhausted, it’s freezing cold, and the altitude literally makes your brain hurt. The oxygen is so thin that you can barely get enough air to breathe. And then the last few miles are super-steep and made of gravelly sand. Korzenko says that for every step forward, you are actually sliding half a step backward. Sounds fun, right?

It’s all worth it, Korzenko says, when you get to the summit. “You will see the world from a spectacular vantage point and it will be entirely, unequivocally worth it,” she explains. “You may have to pick your jaw up off the ground, cry, take photos, and call someone you love or tweet out your victory .... Unfortunately, you can’t spend longer than 15 minutes or so up at the top, since the altitude is tough for the body to take.”<sup>1</sup>

After all that work, after pushing your body through almost all it can take, you get to the top and can only spend a maximum of 15 minutes before you have to descend. Is it really worth it?

Korzenko says it absolutely is. She says that in summiting the tallest freestanding mountain in the world by traveling 50 miles and climbing 19,300 feet, she learned not only what she can handle and achieve, but also that you can't stay at the top of the mountain forever. You have to come back down. Korzenko finishes the article by saying that even though she couldn't stay there, she always has that experience on the top of the summit in her "back pocket" for those times she feels lousy or unmotivated.

But doesn't it seem human to want to stay on top of that mountain forever? After being up on top of the mountain, it seems scary to come back down. The road will be tough, and you will have to process the experience and re-enter the everyday world.

This sounds a lot like Peter, James and John, who go up a mountain with Jesus after having heard the news of Jesus' imminent death in Jerusalem. They don't want to come back down either. It is hard to imagine what must have been going through their minds after hearing such news. In fact, it was Peter who had an intense reaction, even saying, "This must never happen to you." Jesus was not pleased with Peter's response, telling him that he was a stumbling block. Jesus knew exactly where he was headed, and would go no matter what the disciples thought about the situation.

It's after that occurs that Peter, James and John follow Jesus up the mountain, perhaps thinking that there might be an alternative to Jesus meeting death in Jerusalem.

They have played out in their minds the next few days, weeks and months, and they want to stop time. They want to keep Jesus on top of the mountain by building a safe sanctuary away from the world. They want to stay in that moment with Jesus, saving themselves from the impending heartache, but unfortunately, that is not possible. They cannot stay on the mountaintop.

But up on the mountaintop, something incredible happens. The three disciples witness Jesus' time of transfiguration, the moment when Jesus' divinity is affirmed. For at least a brief time, they see God's light despite the chaos ahead. In the weeks to come, they will witness the death of their master and experience loss, fear and confusion. It's scary, and it will be heartbreaking. Then they will see the resurrected Jesus — unsettling in a different way — and will undertake the hard work of forming the early church. But here on the mountain, ahead of all of that, they see Jesus illuminated, and God actually speaks to them. And they can always have that in their “back pocket.”

The text does say, however, that the three disciples “were overcome with fear” when they heard the voice of God. That's not surprising, for when we have “mountaintop experiences,” we often become terrified and fearful as well because such moments often lead us to places we never thought we could — or wanted to — go. This happened to the disciples. They went up the mountain, saw a glimpse of something new that God was doing and then were told they couldn't stay there.

They had to come back down the mountain and continue on their journey — the fearful journey that would eventually lead to Jesus' death.

Because of this transcendent encounter, the disciples left the mountain as changed men. They were transformed by the experience. God had been preparing them on the mountain to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us — and yet, the world that is not beyond the love and light and redemption of God.

Sometimes when we reach the mountaintop, the light is blinding; other times, the light is subtle. Sometimes those mountaintops are lofty vistas, and sometimes they are ordinary scenes, viewed in new light. Those moments are when we begin to see what is possible, and they allow us to tap into our deepest longings to be a part of the new thing God is doing. Back down in the valley, when we start participating in those new things of God, we will be sustained and strengthened by holding onto what we experienced at the top of the mountain.

In the book *The Silver Chair* from *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, C.S. Lewis writes a final word from Aslan, the Christ-representative, which speaks so truthfully about the mountaintop of our spiritual lives:

*Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken.*

*Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs, which you have learned here, will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.*

The air might feel clearer at the top of the mountain, but unfortunately, we can't stay there for long. The disciples couldn't stay there either, but they were reminded to not be afraid.

And that is the message for us too. We have to be brave enough to come down the mountain and bring with us the transformation that we have experienced because we can't stay there. We must remember what it took to get to the mountaintop as we come back down. We need to take with us the lessons of the mountain and the experience of being at the summit.

When the disciples were transformed, they too had to come down the mountain and live *there* in the light of Jesus Christ. The bright light of God will find us when we are living in fear, despair, confusion and chaos. God's light will remind us of those moments on top of the spiritual mountain, and we will be urged to bring what we learned high up back into the world that is in need of transformation. And as we do, may we, as C.S. Lewis said, "remember the signs and believe the signs" and live transformed and ready to face the journey ahead.

The Epiphany season has been a season that focuses in part on the power and majesty of Jesus. People who aren't familiar with the ways of God the wise Men for instance, and even people as amazingly thick headed as the disciples have to recognize someone special in the gospel stories from this season. The Pyrotechnics of his baptism and transfiguration, his healings, exorcisms and other miracles and this year in particular his powerful and radical teaching provide evidence that Jesus is the sort of Messiah we'd expect. Part of the business of Lent, however, is dashing these expectations, – proving that Jesus is not the sort of Messiah we'd choose, but One who represents God's self-emptying, humble, and ultimately life-transforming and life-giving nature.

Transfiguration Sunday stands at the hinge of these two seasons of Epiphany and Lent with a foot in each. On the one hand, it includes all the special effects of a stereotypical Theophany, from blazing light to a heavenly voice. On the other hand, it is transitory, and Jesus leads the 3 disciples away from it back down the mountain on his way to the cross.

Jesus thereby leads us away from a theology of glory toward a theology of the cross. I invite you, then to accompany Jesus and his disciples on this 40-day journey to learn more about Jesus and how He can help us at the cross roads of life.