

Beth Whitbeck – Feb 26, 2017

Sugar Mountain

I think it is kind of funny that my last two sermons have been about Mountains. I few weeks ago I talked about Anger Mountain, and today I titled the sermon Sugar Mountain. On Transfiguration Sunday, where Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and three of the disciples all meet up on the mountain top, it only seemed fitting to talk about mountains.

I have visited some places I really wish I could have stayed. If it were my choice I would still be there right now. My trip to Arizona, where I hiked the Grand Canyon, my vacation to Hawaii, (oh that was so beautiful; no wonder they call it paradise. The colors and the fragrance of the flowers were so vibrant. The ocean, palm trees, mountains, volcanos, the deep blue sky, and oh the sunsets, how beautiful it was to sit on the beach of Hanna Lea and see the sun melt into the ocean as the sky lit on fire. These memories have painted a picture in my mind). As much as I like it here, I would rather be there.

There were also many times in my life that I have frozen in my mind, mountain top experiences; like the day I got married, the day that I promised my life to Bob Whitbeck, a handsome young man, who wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. We had a very special wedding, where we both had written a song for one another and sang it to each other, all the while slides were being shown on this wall to correspond to the words. (Unfortunately this was before video tape, so we have only our memories to replay this day.) Oh, my groom is still here, some 36 and half years later, but now he knows. He knows a lot more about me, than he did some 37 years ago, some good things, and well, some not so good. Bob means more to me now than I thought anyone could ever mean to me, but I could still go back. I could go stand at that altar forever, looking into his blue eyes and resonate with the trust and feeling he made me feel. As nice as it is here, I could go back in a minute.

I also remember the birth of all my children, and now my grandchildren. How special these moments in time were for me. We all have these mountain top experiences in our lives. I hope that you can recall some of these moments that you hold dear to your heart.

Imagine a tent, set on a hill at the top of a 1,500-foot cliff overlooking the Jordan Valley in southern Israel. When the sun comes up in the morning it breaks over the mountains a few miles to the east and literally shatters the darkness around you. The winds sail up the face of the cliff from the valley below and almost make you

believe you could lean out into them and fly away. It is quiet. No phone. No traffic. It is the area that Moses wandered for 40 years. I could do that. I could stay there.

When I was in college I spent many a night talking into the wee hours of the morning with my roommates. We talked about life; philosophizing, trying to solve the problems of the world, (it was the late 70's and it was not just us who reflected on this; it was also reflected in the music of the day). We were trying to figure out what comes next, dreaming of possibilities, but realizing that we would one day have to move on from our current life, and all go our separate ways.

In my senior year, my good friends and I resonated with a song that Neil Young had composed. Maybe you are familiar with it. It is called Sugar Mountain. The chorus goes like this:

Oh to live on Sugar Mountain,

With the barkers and the colored balloons.

You can't be twenty on Sugar Mountain,

If you think you're leaving there to soon. You're leaving there to soon.

The song talks about growing up and becoming an adult. We knew we were on Sugar Mountain when we were in college, but we knew also that it was time to leave. We knew it was time to come down. With each day that past, in my senior year, I was realizing that I too, needed to move on from my college life to the next thing, however scary, and challenging it may be. I realized that I would have to say goodbye to my dear friends who had become more like soul sisters to me. Each one of us would go our separate ways and tackle our journeys in different directions. I didn't want it to end. I, like Peter wanted to build a tent and stay just a little bit longer. I think Peter would understand that. I think that whatever else happened in Peter's life, and we have an awful lot of it recorded, he would have given it all up to go back. And I think I know where he would have gone.

It was a mountain. Nobody agrees today which mountain it was, although there are two top contenders for the title. It was Jesus, James, John and Peter who went up. I will leave it to the theologians to explain what happened up there and will just tell you the way Matthew tells it to us. The four of them walked up the mountain. Just days before, Jesus had told his disciples that story about "picking up your cross" and had assured them that some of them would have to make that choice, so I am sure there was some discussion taking place on the way up. When they reached the

top it happened. While they stood there together, Jesus' face began to change. He began to glow, or shine like the light of the sun. His clothing lit up like "Mr. Clean" in the detergent commercial. Then, suddenly, there were two more standing with them. There stood Moses, and next to him, Elijah. Peter was overwhelmed. He made his decision right then and there. He blurted out to Jesus, "Lord, this is wonderful. How about if I build us some shelter up here and we just stay?" But before he could finish his sentence God interrupted and drove Peter, James and John to their knees. God has that kind of voice sometimes. When they looked back up, it was over. Jesus had started toward the trail back down the mountain. But I think Peter would like to have stayed.

It happens that way. Some here this morning have had that kind of experience. That time in your life when suddenly you knew who Jesus was, and found that everything in the world looked different now that you recognized him. Suddenly everything made sense, and the things that didn't make sense didn't matter. And you really wished you could stay right there. "Let's not go back down the mountain where all those people want all that stuff. Let's stay up here and visit with Moses and Elijah, and hear a bit more from God." Some of us have had the mountaintop experience, and have not wanted to come back down.

Coming back down from the mountain is hard. Most people don't understand what happened up there, and the more you try to explain it, the more they smile that smile at you. Some people do understand, because they have been up there before, too, but it was a long time ago, and they have forgotten what it was like, or, more frightening, have decided that the trip really hadn't made any difference. We don't want to become like them.

It is hard down here. There are noises and confusion here that don't exist on the mountaintop. We are asked to do things here that no one up there asks us to do. We have to make decisions down here that just never come up on the mountaintop. So, some of us decide to go back to the mountain, and stay. It is much easier. On the mountaintop we can enjoy the rush of the experience and the view, without being bothered by what goes on down below. We aren't troubled by the valley's decisions and temptations. The mountaintop is the place to be.

Marriage changes too. Every day we try to look at each other with that same rosy-colored glaze on our eyes that was there that day we stood together on the mountaintop. That gaze filters out so much of what has happened between us and pretends it never happened. But things have happened. We are different people than we were that day. But that is not a bad thing. Living together in the valley

means getting to know more and more of each other. Sure, some things are difficult and unpleasant, but many are wonderful surprises, and marvelous gifts. A marriage of 36 and half years has the chance to be so much deeper and stronger than one of a few days, if we are willing to watch it grow. If we strive to protect it, and keep it away from change, not only do we miss the opportunity to grow closer together in love, but we run the risk of growing further apart by not recognizing how we both have changed. You can't stay on the mountain.

I find myself, at times, trying to run back in time, in the room at the hospital where my first child was born; witnessing the innocence of life, staring into his beautiful blue eyes, holding that bundle of joy. I realize that if I had stayed there in that moment, I would never have had to face- some difficult moments; never arguing, never being challenged, never being disobeyed, sharing in his heartaches and disappointments. But the more I try to stay there, the more I miss, because beyond the painful valleys, there were so many blessings. The blessings of watching a young baby grow, take his first steps, ride his bike for the first time, blow a bubble with his bubblegum, drive a car, go to prom, shave off his first whiskers, graduate from high school, go off to college, find love, find heartache, go into the military, find love again, get married and have a family of his own. We lose so much when we refuse to allow our children to grow up. It is difficult to do, and painful to endure, but it must be allowed to happen.

Freedoms are demanded. Discipline is required. If we looked at him as something less than whom he was, we all would lose. As much as I enjoyed his blue eyes staring innocently into my own, we had to let him grow. You cannot stay on the mountain.

We have climbed the mountain with Peter, and have followed him, sometimes unwillingly, back down. We have had those moments of awe, when we have fallen to our knees and said "Wow!" and we have had those moments of terror and frustration when we have cried out "enough is enough!" There always seems to be the "ying to the yang". They go together. There is no reason to fear coming back down. It is all part of "Life's lessons" that we learn, the good, the bad, and the ugly. We grow from this, we learn from this. We grow physically, emotionally, mentally and most of all spiritually. It is our journey. When the questions or conflict arise in our faith, our choice may be growth instead of death. When the questions or conflict arise in our marriage, our journey may be growth instead of death. When the questions or conflict arise in our parenting, path may be growth and not death. Which pathway do we take, which road do we journey down, which choice do we make?

Peter would not have become who he was if he hadn't gone up that mountain with Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

We wouldn't be who we are - if he hadn't come back down.