

## SKIPPING THE VALLEY

Scriptures: Mark 9:2-8; Mark 8:34-9:1

Sometimes on a nice summer day, which I have been thinking about a lot this last week, I like to ride a bicycle from my house near Mullan Road School west on 57<sup>th</sup>, down the hill on Hatch Road, and out south on Hangman Valley Road past the Hangman Valley golf course. It is a beautiful ride with very little traffic, but it has one drawback. Past the golf course you have to start up a long hill called Baltimore Road. I know there are some cyclists in our church who rip up that hill, but I'm not one of them. I put my bike in the lowest gear and try to keep peddling. About half way up the slope becomes steeper. At least I think it does. But finally I make it to the top, and with a sense of exhilaration, I look across the rolling hills toward home. From the top of Baltimore hill I am almost at the same elevation as my home. I can look straight across and see buildings that are on a level with my house. But I can't get there without going down again into a deep valley and climbing up a hill on the other side. Standing there beside my bike at the top of Baltimore Road, I feel like I'm almost home, if I could only skip the valley.

I think the disciples felt the same way in our scripture reading for today. Jesus takes three of his disciples up a high mountain. It was probably a challenge for them to get there, just like for me to make it to the top of Baltimore Road. When they finally get there, Jesus is transfigured before them.

Let me stop at this point and explain the symbolism. Near the end of Mark's gospel in Mark, chapter 14, Jesus is asked if he is the Messiah, the Son of God. He replies, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' [meaning the right hand of God] and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.'" That is basically what happens at Jesus' transfiguration. The disciples see Jesus shining in glory, enveloped by a cloud in which God declares Jesus to be his Son—the chosen king. The transfiguration is a vision of Jesus coming in glory to establish God's kingdom.

This is confirmed by what Jesus says right before it happens. At the end of Mark 8 Jesus says, "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Then in the next verse, chapter 9, verse 1, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God has come with power." And six days later three of the disciples witness Jesus' transfiguration. The transfiguration is a vision of the day when Jesus will return in power to bring God's kingdom to this world.

This also explains the presence of Elijah and Moses. In the last chapter of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5, God says, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." The final judgment and the coming of God's kingdom will be preceded by an appearance of the prophet Elijah. And here he is at Jesus' transfiguration. The same is true with Moses. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your people; you shall heed such a prophet." Moses' presence on the mountain with Jesus means he is endorsing Jesus as the promised prophet.

It's like Ted Kennedy standing on a platform with Barak Obama, or Rudy Guiliani with John McCain. Their presence on the same platform is a visible statement of their support for the other candidate. The same is true for Moses and Elijah standing on the mountain with Jesus. They are endorsing Jesus' candidacy. They are testifying that Jesus is indeed the promised king. At the transfiguration we are given a vision of Jesus coming again in glory with all the saints to establish God's kingdom.

The disciples understood this, which is why Peter suggests making three dwellings: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. The Greek word translated dwelling literally means "tabernacle." It is the same word used for the tabernacle that Moses built for God in the wilderness. Peter wants to build churches there on the mountain. It makes sense. If Jesus returned in all his power and glory to start the final judgment, wouldn't you expect people to start going to church? That's what Peter thought. Peter thought it would be a good idea to build churches right there on the mountain so they could stay and worship God together.

But that is not what God had in mind. A cloud overshadows the mountain, and a voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him." Those are the same words God spoke to Jesus at his baptism: "You are my Son, the beloved." They confirm that Jesus is the promised king, the Son who will come on the clouds of heaven to establish God's reign. But not yet! Not yet. For in the next instant Moses, Elijah, and the cloud all disappear, and the disciples are left standing there next to the ordinary human Jesus. And then they must start back down off the mountain into the valley.

I don't know about you, but I empathize with the disciples. Wouldn't it be nice to stay on the mountain with Jesus? You children who were home from school this week, wouldn't it be nice not to have to go back, to be on vacation all the time? You high school students were supposed to take finals last week. Wow, talk about getting a break from God. But what if you did not have to go back and take finals at all? Doesn't that sound appealing?

That's what Peter thought. Wouldn't it be nice just to stay on the mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah? Who wants to go back down into that valley? The valley is where you have take tests and face problems and deal with difficult people. Later in chapter 9 when Jesus and the disciples come down off the mountain, immediately they are confronted by a boy with epilepsy, and none of the disciples can figure out how to help him. In the valley you must deal with illness and family problems and problems at work and problems created by the snow.

But for Jesus, it was even worse. For Jesus, going back down to the valley meant going to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and crucified. For Jesus plunging down into that valley meant suffering. It meant sacrificing himself for God and for others.

In the church year the Sunday of Jesus' transfiguration always comes on the Sunday before Lent. Lent is depressing. It starts with Ash Wednesday when a minister puts a black smudge on your forehead and reminds you that you are dust. How depressing is that? Then there are several somber scripture passages that are read in church during Lent, like the one we heard in our first scripture lesson. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." How depressing is that?

I have a theory about why some people come to church only twice a year. My theory is they want to skip Lent. They want to go straight from Christmas to Easter. From singing Christmas carols in a candlelit sanctuary where everyone is excited about opening presents, they want to go straight to Easter, where everyone dresses in new clothes and hears magnificent music and is excited about opening Easter baskets. They want to skip the valley.

I understand. Standing next to my bike on the top of Baltimore hill, I did not want to ride down into that valley. There was pain down there in that valley, and my muscles already ached. But the problem was I could not get home unless I did. There was no bridge from the top of Baltimore hill to Mullan Road School. To get home I had to go through the valley, and so did Jesus, and so do you.

So welcome to Lent. Welcome to the season of the church year and the season of your life when you have to make sacrifices, when you have to put up with the problems of others, when you have to do school work or job work or household chores, not because you enjoy them but because other people are counting on you. Welcome to the valley. The journey is not always easy down here, but if you walk it with Jesus it will bring you home.

- Ken Onstot  
February 3, 2008