

“The Wander and the Climb”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
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One of the questions that is often asked of pastors, particularly asked of pastors by younger folks, is the question, how did you decide to be a pastor. To answer that question, there are, in fact, two ways to go. One way to go is to give the timeline answer. This is the quick and the dirty.

This is the answer that points to real world institutional life decisions, and mine goes like this: Well, I was an English major in undergrad, but I really got interested in Sociology, but Sociology didn't really answer all the questions I had about life, and I always sort of believed in God, so I went to seminary, and there I met a pastor who really turned me on, so I became a pastor, and it was not really what I thought it was going to be. Now, that's one answer to the question.

A second answer to the question is an answer that is really not about the earthly institutional stages of becoming a pastor, but an answer that is really about addressing the universal question with which at all of us at some point is confronted, and that question is, how, where and when does God intervene in our lives so that we know what God wants of us.

Now, to answer this question it is probably very important to acknowledge there are as many ways that God can intervene in our lives as there are human beings to experience such divine intervention. In other words, all of us experiences God's intervention and guidance in our lives differently because we are all uniquely made, and it is what makes the human family beautiful. There are no two of us who are exactly alike.

Biblically speaking, there are two major metaphors (There are other metaphors also, but there are two major metaphors.) that reveal the way in which God's will is made known for our lives. These two ways can be categorized as, first, what we might call a mountaintop experience. This is the, sort of, positive, direct encounter with God that results in clarity about what God wants. This is that experience in our lives where it is sort of like an “Aha!” moment. We have had a direct, or somewhat direct, encounter with God, and we are on fire with the Spirit.

Now, the second metaphor is what we might call a wilderness experience. This is a negative, contested struggle, often with our personal demons, that creates a result, not necessarily of clarity but of an open vulnerability through which God can now enter. Usually, in a wilderness experience, we get very clear about what is no longer working for us, so we have that, sort of, struggle with Jesus in the wilderness with the devil which I read and I say that opens Jesus up for possibilities, so there is the mountaintop experience, and there is the wilderness experience—ways in which God works in our lives.

I want to say that my experience is that mountaintop experiences and wilderness experiences are not necessarily in one particular order. Wilderness experiences do not necessarily come before a mountaintop experience or the other way around. They can come at any time, in any order, and sometimes simultaneously, but struggling with our demons, confronting the lies and the falsehoods that we have built our lives upon, and engaging one-on-one with God's will for our lives, which is the holy alternative to our lives, are both critical and non-negotiable components of the authentic journey of faith—that is to say, in our journey, somewhere along the line, we're going to have those moments when we are really struggling with God and what is God's will in our lives, what is God's plan in our lives, what are we to learn about our lives and God's role in it from our struggles, then that second mountaintop experience, where it is a more direct encounter with the Spirit of God and there is a clarity that comes out of it.

So, to go from here to there, one must visit both the glorious mountaintop and the dark and

foreboding wilderness experience. I think if most of us reflect on our lives, we have had bits and pieces of both of those experiences, and perhaps this morning we are more in the wilderness than on the mountaintop, or vice versa, but those elements are always at work.

Today is what we call in the church Transfiguration Sunday. It is the Sunday when we read the story of a mountaintop experience which takes place in the context of wilderness. In this familiar story, Jesus takes the disciples, Peter, James and John, we are told, up to a high mountain (and in the biblical narrative, really intense things always happen on mountaintops), and while there, Jesus is transfigured—that is to say, his face shines and his clothes turn dazzling white—and there among them, symbolizing both the law and the prophets of the Old Testament, were Moses and Elijah. Then, much like Moses on the mountaintop that John read, there is a voice that comes from the cloud declaring Jesus is God's son, the beloved, and for the disciples, this mountaintop encounter with God, experienced in the depths of wilderness—that is to say, experiencing this mountaintop encounter from a place of uncertainty—the disciples are always in a place of uncertainty.

I told you my Old Testament professor used to call them the “duh-ciples”, but they are always in this place of uncertainty. They don't always quite get it. They are ambivalent like most of us. They are ambivalent about this Jesus person, and their reaction to this encounter of transfiguration is that they do what they always do. They fall to the ground in fear, and they are overcome with the reality that, in Jesus, God is doing a new thing. God is doing a new thing in the world, and God is doing a new thing in their lives, and they fall to the ground in fear.

It is important to know that, throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, he is constantly saying to his followers, do not be afraid, and when I hear him say that, when I read that in the scriptures, what I hear him saying is, do not run from this. Do not run away from this moment because something new is about to happen in your lives. Be present for this moment. Because the disciples have had their eyes opened, they have seen a glimpse of a new reality and it is a reality that is frightening because, what God is doing through Jesus is, indeed, frightening. It was frightening then. It is frightening in our time today. The truth is that encounters with the presence and purpose of God in our lives can be frightening because, although our lives may not be running smoothly when we are at the controls, if God is running things, then there is no doubt that we are no longer in control. I think what you have with the disciples always reacting as fear is this issue of control. You're asking me to do what? They are fearful, and they are getting a glimpse of this whole new reality that Jesus is modeling, teaching and showing to them.

Control is an issue that I know about very well. Some of you know (and some of you don't) that I hate to fly in airplanes. I HATE to fly in airplanes! I have gotten from my doctor really good drugs that help me get on planes. When I am back there in coach, I am struggling with fear and control, but if they were to ask me to go up and drive the plane, I would be all right. We would slam that plane into a mountaintop, but I would be in control. Control issues in our faith and in our lives are irrational because, me on that plane, I can't fly a plane, but if I am in control of it, there is something going on there, and I think it is not unlike faith. It is not unlike these disciples. They are seeing in Jesus this new reality that, in a sense, asks them to let go and let God because we are not in control of our lives. God is in control. To relinquish control and let God have God's way is to create the possibilities of newness.

In the end, mountaintop experiences with God not only provide an opportunity for an encounter with God and for clarity in our lives, but mountaintop experiences also require a descent. Peter, if you noticed in that scripture, like many of us, wanted to build dwellings on the mountain and just stay there with Jesus, just bask in the glow and stay there, but our faith requires that we go down and that we go back into the world, that we go back down into where the wilderness lurks, where our demons might still find us, but we go down with a new clarity. We go down with a new purpose and a new strength. We go down, not with all the answers, but with a new courage to truly look for answers, a courage that allows us to move out of our comfort zones and not to have our lives determined by our fears. With this courage, we can engage the other, and the other is scary. We can again open the

doors of the church with this courage. We can open the doors of our lives to welcome new and different people into our lives. We can welcome new ideas, ideas that we have never entertained before, and we can welcome a future that we have never seen or even dreamed of before. All of this possibility is called transformation, and it is God's will for our lives.

God's will for our lives is to move beyond where we have been, to move beyond where we are, and to know that, as we move, God is with us every step of the way. The word from Jesus to us is, do not be afraid. There is something new about the happen in our lives. Do not be afraid. Amen.