

## **Just Give Me the Strength to Climb**

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March 11, 2018, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Genesis 15:1-7; 12-21, Luke 13:31--35

**Let us pray:** *Lord, open our eyes to see the beauty of you that lies within us; open our hearts to the compassion you carry for us daily; and finally Lord, open our ears to the sweet whisper of your wisdom. AMEN*

Some of my friends will attest to the fact that because of my "witty" social commentary that I could consider pursuing work as a stand-up comic (sounds kind of silly), but I could certainly get into the genre. However, many times, when I preach, I use a joke or two to "warm-up" the crowd and the feedback is usually, that I am encouraged "not to quit my day job."

And now I've done that! (quit my day job) living happily –thank you very much. But it is within said former job as a hospital chaplain that I encountered so often the ironic meaning(s) of life that sometimes it did seem like a joke to me. Not a "ha-ha" joke, but a reflective and challenging (what the heck is going on) joke. You see, I ministered with many people diagnosed with cancer, HIV, and other life-limiting conditions such as diabetes and heart failure, and to add insult to injury, just the other day, the news came that a close friend of my sister is in last stages of cancer and she happens, actually to work as a comedian! Very beautiful woman, very religious, (not feeling very funny right now) but very angry with God. Yes, as with her and others in my ministry, I witnessed daily, a complicated journey towards death or the painful struggle to manage the disease and to delay death as long as possible.

Think about when serious illness presents, you are a "regular" person who is just moving along on this journey called life and all of a sudden, this "thing" plops itself right down in your pathway like a big huge mountain! Everything comes to a screeching halt and you have to figure how to negotiate to the other side. You don't like being stopped, this isn't part of your life plan and you get plenty angry and/or the wind gets knocked out or you perhaps become depressed. So you try to get around it (too wide) can't go under it (too deep), all you can do to get to the other side is to engage and-- climb that mountain! Indeed, your automatic response is to anticipate a "cure", an unconditional extension on life. Your hope is that the Lord will move that mountain.

So the question becomes "how do we live with these tensions – the 'in your face -- life vs. death challenges,' what do we hope for and what do we do while we are waiting for that 'hoped for' outcome?"

Before we look to answer that question, let me expand our thinking beyond physical illnesses. These "challenges" don't always happen in that context. There are so many other life changing. "Mountains to climb." We find ourselves in a waiting vigil for death of many kinds -- of a relationship, a job, a place to live, and a way of life in general. Even when we are waiting for something we look forward to -- like graduating from high school, going away to college,

getting married, having a baby; and here is an interesting one -- caring for someone who recovers and no longer needs our help -- no matter what the context, the old way, your familiar way of living is gone. It becomes uncomfortable for you because you may have to change and you must do things you haven't done before in order to make a successful transition in your life. Yes, we all are challenged with the tension of living with grief over that which is no more and the hope of something new being created.

Right now, we Christians are in a time of "waiting". Just as in Advent (*which honestly seems like yesterday*) when we are waiting for a birth we are now in Lent, waiting for a death. Now some of you might say, wait a minute Reverend, you been talking about death and the end of things ad-nauseam, but the fact is that Lent ends with the resurrection --- triumph over death! Shouldn't we celebrate that instead of grieving over death? Yes we could go the Easter morning route, BUT, the death did happen, three long days in a tomb, wrapped up in a burial rag, and there is no way to get under or over it – going through it was only option -- and Jesus knew this better than anyone!

In this morning's scripture readings, we are witness to two stories from two different points of views, levels of understanding and outcomes, but both are needed to contribute to the whole of the message today.

In the Gospel text, we hear the story of Jesus as he is beginning his trip to Jerusalem. He is moving out from his ministry on the margins of the empire in Galilee and moving towards the center of power, Jerusalem; the big city; the place where the Great Temple is; but also the center of Roman regional control. The place where Jesus will complete the end of his human existence on earth.

Now Jesus was working up a good head of steam in the days before his death. He was not even deterred over the fact that his life was overtly threatened, he instead was doing his father's work and attending to the well-being of his people and offering to look out after them, as a hen attends to her brood – even though they showed no desire to be looked out by him. He was defiant against those (such as Herod) who would try to keep him from attending to God's people. Even in his last days, he was continually defining himself in terms of the community and his service to it!! Death was inevitable, but it wasn't going to stop his attending to the family of humankind. Jesus was doing his work with a new intensity despite the continual bad news he was receiving. But we also know that eventually he gave over to the grief and fear that he was feeling and yet, he found his way through the darkness. What gave him the strength to trust?

It was his journey to Jerusalem. That city symbolized more than just a place to which Jesus was going. It was a purpose, a final act in his earthly ministry. Jerusalem, the gateway to the "mountain" called crucifixion that he had to climb. Jesus was headed there to die and he knew it. When he said "On the third day I finish my work" he was thinking about the resurrection which would finish his work in his human body and bring him to his divine glory on the other side.....(*can I hear an Amen*)?

..... Just Give Me the Strength to Climb - Lord, just give me the *faith* to climb - This call to the heart of God comes from the African American experience of keeping the faith while moving through a difficult situation, knowing that your resources to cope are limited, calling on the Lord Jesus to help to take what are essentially “baby steps” until you can get your bearings, orientation and trust in the journey, and not necessarily putting your energy into the outcome. This is what we are really talking about and this is for what we can hope. Now, not all of us can do what Jesus specifically did or are we expected to do so, instead our strength lays in discernment of what to do, when to do and how to do.

This is where our second “point of view story” from the Older Testament comes into view. In it Abram sets for us an example of such a “what to, when to, how to” journey. According to the scripture, God “rested” him to sleep because his mind and spirit was so anxious that he couldn’t hope and or accept what God was saying to him about moving forward and starting a new life.

The interesting thing is that it was the promise, itself that God made to Abram, if you can believe this, that was his “*mountain*” block in his pathway to new life, Abram couldn’t trust. So he kept reacting and/or doing things that were based on his own familiar skills set that he thought would fulfill the promise that God made to him. Basically, he was ducking and dodging at every turn to keep from dealing with a transition that had so much mystery and unfamiliarity to it.

Through all this, however, God patiently teaches Abram to trust and God kept having to say, “No, you don’t need to do this or that in order that my promises to come to fruition – just trust what I tell you!” Abram was then put into a God-induced trance in what is described as a kind of “thick and dreadful darkness.” While in this state, Abram is witness to God’s preview of the next few hundred years of history. It is only then that God is able to seal the covenant with Abram.

So let us review this story. Abram was so used to living by his wits and cunning that when Abram heard that his life was going to change in good ways, he couldn’t have confidence in it, couldn’t engage it into his normal way of thinking. It was an unknown – so waiting for God to act was too stressful for him. This is when God put him in a mindset to have all of his defenses down, and he finally caught a clue of what was in store for him!

Some of you might wonder, with Abram’s story being a text for Lent, is it really calling us to do nothing in anticipation of the crucifixion -- just sitting there hoping for God to induce our coma and make everything ok? No, of course not! Our take away from this narrative is to engage the two things we fear in this waiting: change and the unknown that can result from it. Because when we hope for the familiar or our “normal” - it can lead to disappointment because our normal is changed and we have to learn to recognize and see the new opportunities that lay within it.

This is where climbing a mountain becomes a good metaphor because I guess that not many of us consider it to be an appealing activity. The first thought we may have is “what’s the use” I am out of shape and have no skills to climb it and it’s a REALLY BIG mountain, so maybe if I pretend that it doesn't scare me, it will go away!! But if you are dealing with something as daunting as chemotherapy or an imminent end of life or a type of life as you know it, you can’t ignore reality of what has, or will be happening. That mountain ain’t going nowhere and you gonna have to engage it to get to the other side.

So have you ever thought about what it takes to climb an actual mountain? Here’s an interesting thought! As you begin to those first “baby steps”, you will physically build up your muscles and develop additional skills you did not have when you started. As time goes on, you begin to recognize little insignificant crevices than now can become anchors, and you may ask for help from people that you not have not associated with before, who have the experience and skills to help you. You may end up trusting the very things that scared you in your previous life. And sometimes, just like Abram, you learn that you need to rest along the way in order to gain new perspectives and develop new strategies to engage your new skills.

What this models for us as a Christian community is a practice called, “active waiting.” This is a process through faith, which consists of prayer, of trust, and of discovering and un-layering new parts of self.”

You will then find that our greatest strength is to seek life in the face of death (which includes all types of deaths). You are alive until you die, we all are. However, you now have, even in the shadow of death, the opportunity to discover something about living that you would have never considered before.

The Good News is that Abram’s story is an example of what God can and will do in our waiting. The “Better and Ultimate Best News” is that what Jesus did in facing his death, was the fulfillment of the promise of hope that we all search for in our time of darkness. In this time of Lent, we can learn to nurture the “un-known-ness” of waiting and learn to trust. And when you trust, you don’t have to worry about what’s on the other side, you can just concentrate on the new sensibilities you are developing around your life and who you are in relationship to God. And if you give yourself permission to rest when you need to, it is in these moments in the darkness that God will show a peaceful presence and infuse you with strength and hope that you never thought possible.

So, my sisters and brothers, as we prepare for Jesus’ death, let us not skirt around what happened to him and to ourselves sometimes, but boldly move into the moment of death, the fierce unknown, the unbelievable darkness – finding it as a place to grow and change -- and with the love and nurture of the Holy Spirit we will have the strength to climb. Then in the end, with victory, we all can rejoice in the resurrection as new creatures in Christ!!

*AMEN and thanks be to God!*