

# Spiritual Mountain-Climbing

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### Sermon Audio file

Seminaries long ago used to teach that the ideal sermon should have three points and end with a poem. Who knows if they ever really taught that, but it's been something of a joke among preachers ever since: a byword for a boring and uninspired sermon. "Three points and a poem." Ho-hum. Well, ready or not, I'm going to shake things up a bit and begin today's message with a poem, not end with one.

This poem, titled "The Mountain," by Robert Frost<sup>[1]</sup> tells the story of a chance encounter with an old-time New England farmer. It's a little long, so bear with me.

The mountain held the town as in a shadow / I saw so much before I slept there once: / I noticed that I missed stars in the west, / Where its black body cut into the sky. / Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall / Behind which I was sheltered from a wind. / And yet between the town and it I found, / When I walked forth at dawn to see new things, / Were fields, a river, and beyond, more fields. / The river at the time was fallen away, / And made a widespread brawl on cobble-stones; / But the signs showed what it had done in spring; / Good grass-land gullied out, and in the grass / Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark. / I crossed the river and swung round the mountain. / And there I met a man who moved so slow / With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart, / It seemed no hand to stop him altogether.

"What town is this?" I asked. // "This? Lunenburg.

Then I was wrong: the town of my sojourn, / Beyond the bridge, was not that of the mountain, / But only felt at night its shadowy presence.

"Where is your village? Very far from here?"

"There is no village - only scattered farms. / We were but sixty voters last election / We can't in nature grow to many more: / That thing takes all the room!" He moved his goad. / The mountain stood there to be pointed at. / Pasture ran up the side a little way, /

And then there was a wall of trees with trunks: / After that only tops of trees, and cliffs / Imperfectly concealed among the leaves. / A dry ravine emerged from under boughs / Into the pasture.

"That looks like a path. / Is that the way to reach the top from here? — / Not for this morning, but some other time: / I must be getting back to breakfast now."

"I don't advise your trying from this side. / There is no proper path, but those that have / Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's. / That's five miles back. You can't mistake the place: / They logged it there last winter some way up. / I'd take you, but I'm bound the other way."

"You've never climbed it?"

"I've been on the sides / Deer-hunting and trout-fishing. There's a brook / That starts up on it somewhere — I've heard say / Right on the top, tip-top — a curious thing. / But what would interest you about the brook, / It's always cold in summer, warm in winter. / One of the great sights going is to see / It steam in winter like an ox's breath, / Until the bushes all along its banks / Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles — / You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it!"

"There ought to be a view around the world / From such a mountain — if it isn't wooded / Clear to the top." I saw through leafy screens / Great granite terraces in sun and shadow, / Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up — / With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet; / Or turn and sit on and look out and down, / With little ferns in crevices at his elbow.

"As to that I can't say. But there's the spring, / Right on the summit, almost like a fountain. / That ought to be worth seeing."

"If it's there. / You never saw it?"

"I guess there's no doubt / About its being there. I never saw it. / It may not be right on the very top: / It wouldn't have to be a long way down / To have some head of water from above, / And a good distance down might not be noticed / By anyone who'd come a long way up. / One time I asked a fellow climbing it / To look and tell me later how it was."

"What did he say?"

"He said there was a lake / Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top."

"But a lake's different. What about the spring?"

"He never got up high enough to see. / That's why I don't advise your trying this side. / He tried this side. I've always meant to go / And look myself, but you know how it is: / It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain / You've worked around the foot of all your life. / What would I do? Go in my overalls, / With a big stick, the same as when the cows / Haven't come down to the bars at milking time? / Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear? / 'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it."

"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to — / Not for the sake of climbing. What's its name?"

"We call it Hor: I don't know if that's right."

"Can one walk around it? Would it be too far?"

"You can drive round and keep in Lunenburg, / But it's as much as ever you can do, / The boundary lines keep in so close to it. / Hor is the township, and the township's Hor — / And a few houses sprinkled round the foot, / Like boulders broken off the upper cliff, / Rolled out a little farther than the rest."

"Warm in December, cold in June, you say?"

"I don't suppose the water's changed at all. / You and I know enough to know it's warm / Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm. / But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

"You've lived here all your life?"

"Ever since Hor / Was no bigger than a — "

What, I did not hear. / He drew the oxen toward him with light touches / Of his slim goad on nose and offside flank, / Gave them their marching orders and was moving.

The heart of this poem is an ordinary conversation between two people that somehow manages to traffic in the profound: "It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain you've worked around the foot of all your life."

Isn't there something sad about this farmer who has spent his entire life staring up at the mountain's looming form, but never once ventured to the summit? All he knows about it – and about the mysterious, storied spring near the top – he learned secondhand. There it was all along. He could have set out upon the upward trail, but somehow never did.

How is it for us when it comes to that most essential and enduring feature of our lives, our knowledge of God? Does all that we know of God depend on the hearsay of others, or does it find its grounding in something we've experienced firsthand? If someone were to stop any one of us and ask what it's like to have a "mountaintop experience," would we be able to share anything meaningful?

That's a question Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John might have had a hard time answering – until that day they followed their Master up the side of the mountain, huffing and puffing all the way to the summit.

At the top, they saw something wholly unexpected – not a bubbling spring, whose water seemed to run cool in summer and hot in winter, but Jesus "transfigured" before them. When the fleeting experience was over, they knew their lives would never be the same.

No one can say, for sure, what that experience was. The best guess is that it was some kind of vision: "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him" (Matthew 17:2-3).

Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of Israel! As if the transformation of their Master's appearance – his clothing and himself shining bright as the sun – hadn't been enough, Jesus gets a double celebrity endorsement besides!

Even so, it takes a while for Peter and the others to get the point: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you

wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4). There is Peter, like so many of us: overworking, over-functioning, barely taking a second to stop, catch his breath and behold the wonder unfolding before his very eyes!

Some moments are simply meant to be savored for what they are, not preserved for posterity. Have you ever been at a tourist spot where people are taking pictures and videos with their smartphones? They're so desperate to preserve what they're seeing that they barely even see it, not firsthand, anyway. Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, but only seeing it through that tiny screen ... what a waste! Come on, Peter, forget the lean-to shelters. Stop doing, for once. Just concentrate on being, on gratefully receiving the wonder that's before your eyes!

Where are the mountaintops in our lives? Where do earthbound folk like us stand a better-than-average chance of encountering the living God?

No one, of course, can dictate where God's going to show up - the spirit-wind "blows where it chooses," as Jesus taught Nicodemus (John 3:8). Even so, there are certain things we can do to position ourselves in the right place at the right time. Today - here on the threshold of Lent - is a good time to think about these things because of the various commitments we can choose to adopt as part of our Lenten discipline.

For a starter, we can pray. This is more than the hurried grace before dinner, the sleepy-eyed bedtime prayer, or the swift request beamed to God in a moment of spiritual panic. The only way to truly ascend to the mountaintop in prayer is to practice a patient, contemplative kind of prayer. Such prayer is more watchful waiting than conscious thought, more silence than speech. And yes, it does require a block of dedicated time.

Another way of ascending the mountain is to read the Bible. Again, this requires dedicated time, not a few seconds here and there amidst the frantic multitasking of our days. There are ways of reading carefully chosen Bible passages devotionally, ways that allow us as readers to brood over the text, attuned to what God the Holy Spirit is trying to say to us.

Still another way of opening ourselves to God's presence is by attending worship regularly. Now that suggestion may sound painfully obvious for any preacher to say from the pulpit, but there's truth in it, all the same. You can't count on sensing the presence of the Lord in worship every Sunday, but it does happen to a great many of us with some regularity. Why else would people come to church if it weren't for such an expectation?

Some leading historical figures of the faith received their most cherished insight in a service of worship. For example, the young Isaiah was worshiping in the Temple when he had that ecstatic vision of the angel holding the burning coal, and of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8).

Another example is John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. He was a priest in the Church of England, who thought his spiritual life was just fine until he accepted an invitation to attend a worship service. In Wesley's own words:

"I went very unwilling to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."<sup>[2]</sup>

Through prayer, Scripture reading and worship - ordinary spiritual disciplines - we, too, can ascend the mountain. We can open our hearts to whatever God is ready to do with us. Once again, I should emphasize that no spiritual seeker can summon the Holy Spirit at will. You can't make yourself have a spiritual experience. Only God can see to that. Yet - to adapt a state lottery advertising slogan to a more sacred purpose - "you can't win if you don't play."

It's always a sad thing when a mountain remains unclimbed. Like the farmer in Robert Frost's poem, the mountain is always there, looming up familiar and serene, but its summit never attempted. Is there a spring at the top, or isn't there? Will the Lord appear, shining brightly as the sun - or must the waiting continue? Who can know? But you can only find out for sure by climbing!

Russell Schweickart was an astronaut who flew the lunar module for the Apollo 9 mission. Like many of his

fellow astronauts, he found that his life was changed by the experience of looking down at the Earth from outer space. Here's what he said about it: "Up there you go around every hour and a half; time after time after time, and you wake up in the morning over the mid-East, and over North Africa. You look out of your window as you're eating breakfast – and there's the whole Mediterranean area, and Greece and Rome, and the Sinai and Israel. And you realize that what you're seeing in one glance was the whole history of [humanity] for centuries; the cradle of civilization. You go across the Atlantic Ocean, back across North Africa. You do it again and again. You identify with Houston, and then with Los Angeles, and Phoenix and New Orleans. The next thing you know, you are starting to identify with North Africa. You look forward to it. You anticipate it. And the whole process of what you identify with begins to shift.

"When you go around it every hour and a half, you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing. And that makes a very powerful change inside of you. As you look down you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross – again and again. And you can't even see them. Still, you know there are thousands of people fighting over some imaginary lines down there that you can't even see, and you wish you could say, 'Look at that! Look at that! What's important?'"[3]

So, what is truly important? Is it the many tasks, duties, chores, errands, and assignments that fill our days with low-level noise? Or is it those "bigpicture" kinds of moments, the rich intervals of stillness and of calm – the times of "being still and knowing that the Lord is God," sensing the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts?

The season of Lent provides many opportunities for spiritual mountain-climbing. We don't need a Saturn V rocket, as Rusty Schweickart and his fellow astronauts did, to catapult us up to the proper vantage-point. All we need do is walk, slowly and steadily, up the side of the mountain looming over us all our lives. We don't need the lung-bursting strength and endurance of an athlete to do it. All we need is persistence, and the willingness to set aside the time needed to make the ascent. Take as much time as you need; the mountain will still be there.

Those 40 days of Lent can be a scarcely noticed string of dates on the calendar, or they can be a season of true spiritual growth. The choice is up to each one of us. "It may not seem so much to climb a mountain you've worked around the foot of all your life," as the poet says. But one thing's for sure: If you never begin to climb, you'll never know the glories of the summit.

[1] Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (Henry Holt and Company, 1915).

[2] Journal of John Wesley for May 24, 1738.

[3] Russell Schweickart, quoted by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Chicken Soup for the Soul, 2012).