

“Climb Your Mountain”

Matthew 11:28-30, Psalm 121:1-2 & 8, Isaiah 55:12 & John 1:4-5

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When you are exhausted how do you invigorate? How do you renew your soul? When you are emotionally shattered how do you revitalize? How do you get away with Jesus, enjoy the unforced rhythms of grace and recover your life?

Jesus said, **Matthew 11:28-30 MSG “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”**

Recently I have shared some of the ways I am renewed: time with Leslie, Spencer and Abigail; popcorn movie nights; bike rides; a prayer cabin; doing laundry; centering with God in the morning; silence; and being grateful for five blessings every day.

Climbing mountains always renews, invigorates, and revitalizes me. Of course climbers would describe my mountain climbing as hiking up a hill. The psalmist sings, **Psalm 121:1-2 & 8 “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”**

All of us are constantly climbing mountains. A few of us physically climb mountains. All of us climb emotional and spiritual mountains. At times we find ourselves in a deep valley needing to crawl out. Perhaps a valley of a broken relationship, illness, predicament, a personal struggle, or an avalanche of work. We climb mountains of growth, to love, to rejoice, and serve. We climb spiritual mountains to connect with God, be transformed and live life to the fullest.

A mountaineer wrote, “I truly believe that there is no greater metaphor for life than climbing mountains. The mountains have a way of stripping the mind down to its basic senses and forcing us to live in the moment. In order to do this we must respect everything around us and maintain balance. If you guys truly value your lives, then you must live them to the fullest. We have planned this trip for quite some time. If we do not summit because we make the decision to turn back, then we will have learned yet another lesson. If we do not summit because we did not try, then we will learn nothing. I hope we all realize that if we believe mountaineering is about getting to the top of mountains, then we are treading a path of foolery. Mountaineering is about everything BUT getting to the top. It is about teamwork, courage, fortitude, good decision making, determination, etc. Getting to the top is merely the culmination of effort and circumstance.”

Physically climbing mountains is a way I get away with Jesus and recover my life. As I hike, the rhythm enables me to process and let go, the rhythm gives me new perspectives, the rhythm opens me to let come God’s healing, grace, blessings, and guidance.

The most miserable hike was on the Superior Hiking trail in shin deep muck. As I provided abundant meals to ravenous mosquitos and famished black flies, I then noticed the beauty of the waving leaves on the trees. Sometimes life is full of hungry problems and each step is an arduous undertaking. **Isaiah 55:12 “You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”**

The most reassuring hike was in dense fog on the Appalachian Trail. I was ranting to God overwhelmed by seminary work, troubled by finances, uncertain how to be a good husband and father, as Spencer would soon be born, blurred by ordination exams and all the requirements I needed to complete for the Presbyterian Church. Worst of all I knew that we would be homeless if I did not find a church to serve upon graduation in a few months. After a half day of ranting and hiking in dense fog, I sat down on a rock peering into the dreariness. A gust of wind blew away the fog and I could see the beauty of the landscape. A wave of peace came over me and somehow I realized everything would be alright.

The easiest was Mount Rainer which should have been the most difficult. I planned and exercised for this trip for a year. Twice a week a personal trainer put me through an ever-changing rigorous workout specifically designed to strengthen my climbing. I carefully acclimatized to the altitude with short hikes. The day of the climb the weather was perfect. I felt great and climbed with ease, the culmination of my planning and exercise. The views were spectacular as I looked down upon alpine meadows blossoming with every color which gave me even more strength.

The strangest was Mount St. Helens. The landscape was barren, nothing was alive, everything was a shade of dull brown. The ash was like hiking in deep sand, except it was sharp and there were shards of lava that scratched my legs and worked into my shoes hurting my feet. I trusted the guide book that urged me on. It said the view from the summit is worth the boring, bleak, painful, climb. Everything changed as I stood at the crater rim peering down into a sapphire lake, young vibrant green pines covered the valley mixed with bushes adorned in scarlet.

The most gear was used during winter hiking in the Catskills, lugging enough food, fuel, clothes, crampons, skis, and snowshoes. The progress was gruelingly slow. One morning, I unzipped the tent and saw a new dimension of stunning beauty, everything was covered in frost except a porcupine in a tree.

I could talk about my mountain climbing adventures for days. I wish I could communicate how I am renewed. Climbing mountains for me is an encounter with God, a mystery that nourishes hungers I don't even know I have, a mystery that heals hurts I am unaware that were aching, a mystery that renews, invigorates and revitalizes me. Each mountain is different. I am always surprised by how God meets me. All I know is when I climb mountains I am more sensitive to the presence of God.

Moses climbed a mountain where he connected with God. After climbing his mountain Moses glowed with joy and love. Moses savored God's blessings which sustained him through all the deep valleys he would experience in his life.

What is your mountain?

In his book *Living The Sabbath* Norman Wirzba explains that the meaning of Sabbath is opening oneself to "God's creative refreshing power". "After six days of divine work creation was not yet complete. What creation lacked, and thus what remained to be created, was *menuha*, the rest, tranquility, serenity and peace of God. In the biblically informed mind, *menuha* suggests the sort of joy and harmony that comes from things being as they ought to be; we hear in *menuha* resonances with the deep word *shalom*." It is this capacity for joy, love, delight, harmony which sits as the crowning achievement of God's creative work. Norman continues, "The creation of *menuha* is not a divine afterthought. Nor should it be viewed in a passive way, as a mere withdrawal from exertion. God's rest on the seventh day did not amount to a pulling back but rather a deep sympathy, harmony, love and celebration with all that was there. In so delighting in the splendor of creation, God invites creatures to bask in the glory of the divine life. In a most important way, therefore, the creation of *menuha* gave to the whole of creation its ultimate purpose and meaning. Sabbath, being the climax of creation, is thus the goal toward which all our living should move. Humanity's most fundamental task is to share in God's continuing work of fashioning a livable and lovable world."

Richard Lowery points out that God frequently stops to proclaim each day's creative work as "good". Not only good but delightful, an occasion for intense joy. Norman says, "God suffuses every moment with the potential for joy and peace. Sabbath is opening ourselves up to the joy of God and letting God's intentions for *menuha* take precedence over our own ways. Sabbath is not a break from life but rather a profound theological lens that enables us to get a better look at all of it. Sabbath is the key that opens life to its fullest and best potential." Failure of Sabbath observance leads to the breakdown of life itself. Sabbath is arranging our schedules and directing our choices so that they manifest at all times a deep appreciation for the diverse ways of God's grace. Sabbath is caretaking and celebrating God's wonderful array of blessings. Sabbath is a way a life that we work toward, a mountain summit that we climb to. Sabbath frames our entire life, helping us set priorities and determine which of our activities and aspirations bring honor to God. Sabbath opens one to welcome, perceive, and learn of God's presence. Sabbath is attentiveness to the evidences of God's grace that surrounds us and is transforming us. Sabbath is gratitude, thanksgiving and praise that declares the loving goodness of God. Sabbath is finding rest, meaning, purpose, belonging in God. Sabbath is loving ourselves and others the way God loves restoring goodness. Sabbath is connecting with each other as servants spreading love and celebrating unending joy. When we live Sabbath we catch glimpses of heaven, a taste of God's delight in a created order beautifully made and God's delight in the harmony of love uniting us all as family."

John 1: 4-5 NLT "Jesus, the Word gave life to everything that was created and Jesus' life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it."

Susanne Metz wrote, "Our God has become manifest as Jesus. The God who created the universe came to pitch a tent among a people who inhabit a tiny speck of planet in a universe we're still exploring—the boundaries of which seem to be unending. The tiny baby we're still gazing at in our manger scenes is not only baby Jesus, but also bigger than the universe we study, more powerful and creative than our minds could ever imagine. How can we even begin to imagine? I'm sitting in a gorgeous Welsh valley surrounded by high, but softly rounded mountains. I read the Psalm, one of many, that uses the image of God being like the mountains. God is that strong and beyond beauty in our lives, too. God surrounds us like the mountains. If we look at those mountains, soak in the extraordinary colors of the wildflowers that spreads like a cloak on the mountains' shoulders, stand still in the shade of a towering tree, close our eyes and feel the arms of timelessness and power surround us, then we may begin to feel the expansiveness of the God who has come as a tiny human baby. Later, I'll take a hike to the top of one of the mountains. It promises to be a strenuous climb, but the view from the top, and sitting beneath a waterfall, make it all worthwhile. It's like our spiritual life. There are the strenuous times—the climbing toward something we know will be good, worthy of the sweat and aching limbs of our spirit. Our desire to see more and learn more is rewarded with a new and stunning view, as well as the refreshing, life-giving water of a deeper awareness of God within us. This God who has pitched a tent among the people waits for us. God doesn't force beauty on us, but offers it to us, helps us as we strive for it— as our sturdy hiking boots and walking sticks help us on a climb. Some, never welcome God. Some, blinded by greed or hate or selfishness, miss the beauty, ignore the child who offers to heal them. This child, this Word made flesh, brings us into kinship with our God, Abba. We become the children of God. Explosive! This Christmas season, may each of us be born anew and know the power of God."

In 15 days we will climb a mountain of three months of sabbatical. Hopefully it will allow us to dream; to open ourselves to God's refreshing, joyful love; and to creatively discover how to live, love, and serve together. By taking time to pause and rest, we can be mindful of and rejoice in God's abundant love and blessings for us, and be renewed by God's refreshing power to partner with God and

one another in sharing God's joyful love for the world. Ultimately, living in Sabbath will help us to realign our spiritual practices and determine how we want to move forward as a church in ways that bring honor to God.

Hopefully you will be inspired to climb your own personal mountain, to do whatever enables you to get away with Jesus and recover your life. Or maybe it is not doing, rather resting, being, receiving the unforced rhythms of grace. Perhaps you have not yet discovered your personal mountain that provides Sabbath for you, the renewing, invigorating and revitalization grace of God. Then read *Catch Your Breath*, experiment with the practices, listen intently in your small group, try the different ways of worship that will be offered during the sabbatical. If you still have not found your renewing, invigorating, revitalizing mountain then soak in the insights from the Sabbath Book you will receive at the end of the sabbatical.

For those of you who have enjoyed a time of Sabbath please submit an illustration to Lonnie Rangel for the Sabbath Book. The Sabbatical Taskforce will gather all of our insights, create a book and publish a book for all of us. It might be a written reflection, a picture with a description, a poem, quote, drawing, painting or whatever is Sabbath for you that can go on a page in the Sabbath book.

Each of us has our own mountain, our own story, our own moment when God turns that which is unbearably painful into something meaningful; when God turns the joyful into something absolutely miraculous; when God transfigures the ordinary into an unmistakable revelation of God's great love for us. God takes you mountain climbing to reveal the glory of God's joyful love to you. Amen