

“Altitude Adjustment”  
Exodus 34:29-35    Luke 9:28-43a

One topic of conversation the week after the Super Bowl is not only commiserations on the game itself but also the commercials. And in case you didn't get your fill of them during the game there are also web sites where you can watch all of the commercials over and over and over. There was one during the third quarter that got my attention.

The visual is a series of portraits of a variety of men. Each of them is very deadpan with no trace of enthusiasm on their faces at all. A voice gives this litany with the same, just doing my duty kind of tone:

- I will get up and walk the dog at 6:30 AM.
- I will eat some fruit for a part of my breakfast.
- I will shave.
- I will clean the sink after I shave.
- I will be at work at 8 AM.
- I will sit through 2 hour meetings.
- I will say YES when you want me to say YES.
- I will be quiet when you don't want me to say NO.
- I will take your calls.
- I will listen to your opinion of my friends.
- I will listen to your friend's opinions of my friends.
- I will be civil to your mother.
- I will put the seat down.
- I will separate the recycling.
- I will carry your lip balm.
- I will take my socks off before I get into bed.
- I will put my underwear in the basket.
- Then after a significant pause, “and because I do, I will drive the car I want to drive.”

So, what do you do when you get to do what you really want to do? I was wondering how the disciples would have answered that question? They had been carrying a heavy load. That is what Luke is referring to when he says “after these sayings.” Jesus had sent out all of the disciples two by two giving them power and authority over all demons and to cure all diseases., to proclaim the kingdom and to heal. They had been travelling light. Jesus had told them not to take anything extra, no bags, no food, no credit cards.

I can understand the weariness of the disciples on their trip up the mountain with Jesus. They must be exhausted by the non-stop demands of the crowds. When they had been sent off with power and authority it was into the same needy crowds. They have had an enviable run of success and have returned to tell Jesus all about it. But when he takes them to “withdraw privately” for a well-earned rest to do what they really want to do, they are interrupted by even more crowds, and the work of ministry continues. Luke's about eight days means they have been really slammed and enough is enough. The weary disciples beg Jesus to send the crowds away – but we know

what happens next, the crowd is hungry so its fish sandwiches for 5,000, actually more like 15,000 when you count women and children.

When they finally do get a day off, it doesn't feel much like a vacation. Jesus tells them about his upcoming "great suffering," rejection, and death (treatment they can expect as well), and about his rising on the third day. I don't blame them for missing the rising part at the end. These disciples are in no shape for mountain climbing, even if its purpose is to pray. After all, why can't they just pray where they are? To be honest, on some days, the attempt to pray is a steep, uphill climb on weary legs. So perhaps Peter, James, and John can be excused that once they get on the mountain top that it appears that Jesus is actually doing all the praying. The other guys can barely keep awake, but then something happens and the adrenaline kicks in.

This is more spectacular than the Super Bowl half-time show. The bleary eyed disciples see Jesus transformed right in front of their eyes and then suddenly they see Moses, the giver of the Torah and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets right there in front of them talking to Jesus. They can't believe their eyes and they have front row seats. There are no superlatives to describe what they experience so Peter just blurts out something. This is so great we must find some way to make it permanent so it will never, ever end.

But Peter's attempts at memorializing the occasion are wiped away by what is beyond words. The divine voice recalls the affirmation that was given at Jesus baptism, "This is my Son, my Chosen," and then is added, "Listen to him!" And the disciples are brought to awed and reverent and humble and prayerful silence. How could that experience ever be described?

There is a story told about Napoleon during the invasion of Russia. He somehow got separated from his men and was spotted by his enemies, the Russian Cossacks. They chased him through the winding streets. Running for his life Napoleon eventually ducked into a furrier's shop. Gasping for air and talking at the same time he begged the shopkeeper to save him. The furrier said, "Quick hide under this big pile of furs in the corner." Then the furrier made the pile even large by throwing more furs atop of Napoleon.

No sooner had he finished when the Russian Cossacks burst into the shop. "Where is he?" they demanded to know. The furrier denied knowing what they were talking about. Despite his protests the Russian Cossacks tore the shop apart trying to find Napoleon. They poked into the pile of furs with their swords but did not find him. They eventually gave up and left the shop.

After some time had past, Napoleon crept out from under the furs, unharmed. Shortly after Napoleon's personal guards came into the store. Before Napoleon left, the furrier asked, "Excuse me for asking this question of such a great man, but what was it like to be under the furs, knowing that the next moment could surely be your last?"

Napoleon became indignant. "How dare you ask such a question of the Emperor Napoleon?" Immediately he ordered his guards to blindfold the furrier and execute him.

The furrier was dragged out of the shop, blindfolded and placed against the wall of the shop. The furrier could see nothing but he could hear the guards shuffling into a line and preparing their rifles. Then he heard Napoleon call out, "Ready!" In that moment a feeling the shopkeeper could not describe welled up with him. Tears poured down his cheeks. "Aim!"



We can only imagine. I was looking more carefully at how the father describes the condition of his son. He pleads that this is his only Son and he graphically describes, the symptoms, but he never labels them. He does not say his Son is demon possessed; he does not describe him as God-forsaken; he refuses to label him as a lost cause, or no good – no labels at all. There was nothing about his situation that made him beyond the love of God for the darker the valley the more intense is the grace of Jesus Christ. We are aware of many dark valleys. Many we are not aware of.

Right now our brothers and sisters in faith are experiencing that in Haiti right now. The President of the Methodist Church in Haiti is Rev Paul Gesner. This week I watched a video of him describing his experience of the earthquake and its aftermath so far. The day of the earthquake he had been together with Rev Sam Dixon and Rev Clinton Rabb, two executives with the General Board of Global Ministries. They had been visiting some schools and an agricultural project that were new initiatives of the United Methodist Church. They were planning to attend a meeting together that evening but Rev Dixon and Rev Rabb went back to their hotel to rest a bit before the evening's responsibilities and Rev Gesner, after dropping them off was headed back to his office. That was when the earthquake struck. At first he said he felt his automobile shaking then the road literally was jumping up and down. He said he knew he was alive only by the grace of God.

His words were very clear. He said several times, "Pray for us that we will have the courage to keep hope alive. Pray for us that we will have the courage to keep hope alive. Pray for us that we will have the courage to keep hope alive."

Those brothers and sisters in faith have been to the mountaintop and they have been to the deepest valley. We pray for them. We pray with them. We give thanks to God for their witness. We are humbled to worship together in spirit and in truth.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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