

BAPTIZED BY BEAUTY

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Third Sunday After Epiphany, January 21, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Exodus 19: 16-23.

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

A Demented Black Woman

Nearly Forestalled Some of MLK's Greatest Triumphs

Before me is a copy of the final two pages of one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speeches, delivered a couple days before he was killed on April 4, 1965, in Memphis, Tennessee. It's referred to as the "I've been to the mountaintop" speech, and I'd like to quote a bit of this. The context of it is that:

"Several years ago I was in New York City autographing the first book I had written. And while sitting there autographing books, a demented black woman came up. The only question I heard from her was, 'Are you Martin Luther King?' And I was looking down writing, and I said, Yes. And the next minute I felt something beating on my chest. Before I knew it, I had been stabbed by this demented woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. It was a dark

Saturday afternoon. And that blade had gone through, and the X-rays revealed that [she had left the blade in and] the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. And once that's punctured, you're drowned in your own blood — that's the end of you."

"It came out in *The New York Times* the next morning, [and the way in which they worded it was that,] if I had merely sneezed, I would have died. Well, about four days later, they allowed me, after the operation, after my chest had been opened and the blade had been taken out . . . they allowed me to read some of the mail [from that newspaper account. Among the letters he received were those from the President, the Vice President, and the Governor of New York, but there was one from a young girl that he said he would never forget.] It said simply:"

Dear Dr. King,

**I'm So Happy That
You Didn't Sneeze**

"I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School.

"While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I am a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze."

And then Martin Luther King, Jr., with his oratory and his eloquence, goes on to say, Had he sneezed, he would not have been around for any number of events that took place. And then he writes:

"I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting-in they were really standing up for the best in the American dream.

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in interstate travel.

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to help lead the five-day march in 1965 from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been in Memphis, Tennessee, to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

"And I don't mind."

I **Would Like to Live**

**a Long Life, but I'm
not Concerned; I've
Seen the Promised Land**

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go to the mountain. And I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the Promised Land! I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

“And so I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man!

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!”

That’s the way he concludes that speech. What does he mean by “I’ve been to the mountaintop”? Of course, it’s not literal. So what does he mean?

Six Symbolisms, the Greatest Being

Pilgrimage; Climbing the Mountain Is a Metaphor for Spiritual Quest

Mircea Eliada is a fantastic scholar at the University of Chicago, an expert on symbolism and world religions. He wrote very simply that “The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless.”

Let me just recount some of the symbolisms for you, based upon my own research:

- *Our first symbolism applies to really primitive cultures, going*

back to primitive time, when mountains represented the central axis of the world. They were considered to be the navel of the world, or the world revolved around them. You might as well dispense with any literal meaning of this. Regardless of where the mountains are around the globe, this was the case for the cultures that lived around them, particularly the older primitive cultures.

- *A second symbolism that we know well from our own scriptures is Holy Ground. In the Second Book of Moses, Chapter 3, Verse 5, God called to Moses from out of the burning bush, “Remove thy sandals from thine feet, for the ground upon which you stand is holy.” What I like about that passage is what it does not say, “Excuse me, but would you mind putting on your shoes because you’re on Holy Ground and your feet stink.” No, it’s the other way around, “Remove your sandals because this is Holy Ground, and we don’t want anything between you and it.” Holy Ground touches heaven. It’s covered in cloud and mist. It’s the abode of the Gods, and it’s not a coincidence that temples and monasteries are located on mountains.*
- *A third symbolism is fear of lightning and thunder on top of that mountain. Volcanos are seen*

as an entrance into hell, and mountains generally represent obstacles. Here's something that you

have to go around because you can't go over it. Mountains also represent a general concept of "too much." I've got a mountain of work to do.

- *A fourth symbolism is strength, stability, permanence, immovability.* It adds poignance to the saying that Jesus recounted in Matthew 17:20: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." This is one of the most ignored passages in the Bible, right up there with "Turning the other cheek" and "Don't judge."
- *A fifth symbolism is revelation.* Moses goes up on Mount Sinai and receives the Torah. Muhammad goes up on Mount Hira and at least gets the beginning of the Koran from the angel Gabriel. Jesus goes up on Mount Tabor and is transfigured there. As for Peter, James, and John, the three disciples who went with him, their view of Jesus was never the same thereafter. So also in many Buddhist, Zen, Hindu, and Pagan stories. Native American vision quests are often done on mountains as well. It is a place of revelation.
- *A sixth symbolism is that of pilgrimage.* This is the main one.

Climbing the mountain is a metaphor for the spiritual quest.

Everest Is not the Highest

Mountain, but It's Growing; Hydrology Gives Up Water

Most people think they know that Everest is the highest mountain at 29,036 feet. Actually it depends on how one defines it. Mauna Kea, off the Hawaiian Islands, is 33,480 feet, beating Everest by 5,444 feet. The problem is that it's two-thirds underwater, so from base to tip, it beats Everest handily. However, those are just child's play. Olympus Mons is 16 miles high, three times as high as Mauna Kea or Everest. The problem is that it is on Mars. It's the biggest one in the solar system, anyway.

While thinking about mountains, I realized something else that is highly significant — something that we might take for granted, but parched areas around the world, even in the United States, do not take it for granted. That is the hydrological significance of mountains. When humid air coming off the Pacific rolls up over the Rockies, the air gets cooler, and the air pressure lowers as the clouds rise higher in the altitude of the mountains. Thus, the clouds give up their water in the form of snow or rain. Mountains all over the world do this, and it results in basically 80 percent of the world's fresh water because of mountains. Overcast humid air can stay that way a long time, but when it hits a mountain, the higher altitude,

the lower temperature, then they give up the water. For you meteorologists, pressure times volume equals number of moles times gas constant times temperature ($PV = nRT$).

As to size, Everest grows by four millimeters per year. That translates into one inch in every six years or about a foot for each generation, each lifetime of seventy some years. The Adirondacks grow at two to three millimeters per year for a completely different reason. They're over a hot spot — namely, a current of magma that circulates in the middle of the earth, and it goes up, spreads out, and then goes back down and circulates around. One of the areas where the magma goes up and pushes at the root of mountains is right under the Adirondacks, so they're growing at two to three millimeters per year.

For Nonmystics, the Point Is to

Experience the Journey, to Pick a Path and Start Walking Up

Go back with me now to that notion of pilgrimage. I went over that one too fast. Out of all those six symbolisms, that's the big one. Scotty McLennan,* a theologian at Stanford University in California, wrote this quote, and I want to share it with you:

“I like to think that the fundamental metaphor of the religious life itself is climbing the spiritual mountain — all the time, day in and day out, wherever we are and whatever we're doing. There are many paths up that

mountain — many ways that can reach the top, although very few people actually get to the summit of the high mountain of spirituality. Those paths may be rough or smooth, steep or gentle, boring or colorful, tiring or exhilarating. Yet, they're all on the same spiritual mountain, and ultimately they all converge at the very top, as mystics of all religions have told us.

“For most of us who aren't mystics, though, the point is to experience the journey — to find fulfillment in our pilgrimage on the mountain itself — rather than to miss everything along the way in pursuit of the summit. For it can be literally breathtaking up there at the top. . . .”

“The first challenge is metaphorically to pick a path and start walking, because the tendency to sit in an armchair and view the spiritual mountain from a safe distance won't get one very far. Some exertion and effort are required. . . .”

On the communion table in a place precisely where you can't see it, is a wonderful book by Ed Bernbaum called *Sacred Mountains of the World*, and I'd like to share one quote from the preface of that book, because it's beautiful. He writes:

“The ethereal rise of a ridge in mist, the glint of moonlight on an icy face, a flare of gold on a distant peak — such glimpses of transcendent beauty can reveal our world as a place of unimaginable mystery and splendor.

In the fierce play of natural elements that swirl about their summits — thunder, lightning, wind, and clouds — mountains also embody powerful forces beyond our control, physical expressions of an awesome reality that can overwhelm us with feelings of wonder and fear.”

MLK's Analogy Is the Mountain;

AMS's Is an Aquarium of Guppies Sensitive to the World

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I've been to the mountaintop.” I would like to propose an analogy. It'll seem silly at first but work with me:

Imagine in your mind for a moment a guppy in an aquarium. The aquarium is the guppy's world, the gravel, that little fake plastic plant over in the corner, the little bubbler, the filter running in the background, and our guppy has friends. If guppies are true to their nature, there are a lot of them. And tetras and maybe a couple of catfish that hang out on the bottom. That is the guppies' world, but they are also aware that there is a world beyond the aquarium. I've seen this up close and personal.

Imagine that in the household with the aquarium, there are two people, a woman and a man. The woman is the one who feeds the fish, and the

man does not. When the man walks by the aquarium, the fish couldn't care less. The woman walks by the aquarium, and they all scurry to the top, hoping for supper. So they're aware of the world beyond their aquarium. They don't know much about it, but they know it's there.

Now you see where I'm going here. We have our world, our environment, our friends. We even have some predators and some bottom-feeders, as in every society. Our world!

But we also have a bit of knowledge that our world isn't all there is. There is something beyond. And each of us has a feeling, or a bit of evidence, or some experience of that beyond. The spirit world, higher dimensions, whatever we might call it.

Mountains are more than just their primal metaphor for our spiritual quest, more than just a reminder of that beyond, especially when we are so totally engrossed in our world. The mountain also beckons us, encourages us, calls us, draws us toward the higher plane of the spirit.

Trees remind us of our nature, that we are both flesh and spirit, both earthly and heavenly. Mountains call us higher. The view of creation gets better the higher we go.

In a twist upon Martin Luther King Jr's promise, "I just want to do God's will. And he's

allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land!"

Amen.

*Scotty McLennan is the author of *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew up with Has Lost Its Meaning.*