

God and Mountain Climbing

Exodus 3:1 – 12

Mako A. Nagasawa

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Introduction: Climbing Mount Greylock

Two weeks ago, Ming and Toneva and I brought some of our young people out to Western Massachusetts to do some biking and hiking. We hiked up Mount Greylock, which is the highest point in Massachusetts. I asked Aubrey (11 years old) what it was like for her.

[play video of me interviewing Aubrey on Zoom – no password on this link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/s46QAjjPH9z4mVhTK8AgCEinOZ5YStE3D_TOXX8Uf6fBNVaBaamXA4sNC2i2DKHH.nxEiTyoZoHETH2zg?startTime=1658276972000]

Relevance

There are so many parallels between worshipping God and mountain climbing, it is amazing. You might be thinking, “But Mako, I don’t like mountain climbing. I don’t want to go with you.” Mountain climbing is a metaphor that comes from the experience of Jesus and the Jewish people. In Judaism during Jesus’ day, what mountain did people worship on? Mount Zion. What was on Mount Zion? Jerusalem, and in the city was the temple. Three times a year, all Jewish males at least went to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage to meet with God. And as they did, they sang Psalms 120 - 134, the Psalms of Ascent. So they had mountain climbing songs.

Why did the Jewish people meet God on a mountain? Because God likes mountains. Before Mount Zion, there was Mount Nebo, where God launched Israel into the garden land. Before that, Mount Sinai. Before that, Mount Moriah. Before that, Mount Ararat. Before that, Mount Eden. Eden was the first mountain that all humanity were supposed to keep going back to, to meet with God.

Context

So mountains are a metaphor for us. We’ll explore what mountain climbing means for us today. We’re in the book of Exodus. Exodus is the second book of the Bible. With Genesis before it, and then Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy after it, these five books make up the sacred Jewish Torah. These books are meant to be taken all together. But they are so long, they had to be written on five separately scrolls, which is where they get their Greek name Pentateuch. “Penta” means “five” and “teuchos” means “books.”

Exodus is the story of God delivering His people Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 1 – 15), making a sacred covenant relationship with them as He bound Himself to Israel, and Israel to Himself (Exodus 16 – 34), and then came to dwell with them (Exodus 35 – 40). The central figure other than God is Moses. And as Pastor Val has shown us in the last few weeks in this series on worship, Exodus teaches us how to worship God. This is how we respond to this God.

We pick up the story after Moses grows up, then runs away from Egypt at the age of 40, and spends 40 more years in the wilderness. So when Moses is 80 years old, he comes to a mountain, and sees the burning bush.

With God, Mountain Climbing Leads to More Mountain Climbing

As I said before, with God, mountain climbing leads to more mountain climbing. How’s that? When Moses meets God in the burning bush, where is that? At the mountain of God, Mount Sinai.

3:1 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb [aka Sinai], the mountain of God. 2 The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

God loves mountains. I think the picture we get is that the bush was growing on the side of this mountain. Maybe it was near the base. Maybe it was near the top. Either way, God is making a point to Moses with this burning bush near the mountain, or on the mountain.

In v.3 – 12, God tells Moses, “Go lead my people Israel out from Egypt back here to this mountain.” Here is the end of that exchange. 12 And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.’ Then, God lights up the whole mountain with fire -- divine fire. In Exodus 19, God says, “Come meet with Me. Climb the mountain. Step into the fire.” But let’s slow down and savor the points that fall out of this story.

Mountains Give You God’s Perspective

First, this was probably a routine, and Moses probably climbed this mountain and other mountains many times. Why? Because he was tending sheep. When you’re higher up, you see more, and you see where you can lead the sheep for water or grass. Mountain climbing gives you more of God’s perspective. In Exodus 3, Moses is climbing mountains for the sake of sheep. In Exodus 19 onward, Moses is climbing mountains for the sake of people who act like sheep. It’s no wonder Jesus led his disciples up mountains for the same reasons, to teach them to care for people who act like sheep.

That teaches us something about how God prepared Moses, and how God prepares us. Moses was 80 years old. When Moses was 40, he was the big shot in Pharaoh’s court, he had the education, he had the connections, he had the big dreams, and then he had murdered a man, and then he ran away. Then for 40 more years, he watched sheep. He tended sheep. He led sheep around. I’m sure every day, he thought, “These sheep are dumb.” And he understood a little more how God feels with humans.

I know a young man who thought he would get scouted for the NBA, and then he did something that landed him in jail for six years and lots of time to reflect, read his Bible, and care for the men around him to the extent he could. I know a woman who thought she would become the next Oprah Winfrey, and then found herself raising a few kids instead. I thought I would be a hotshot investment banker or something because the day after I graduated from high school, I started work for a financial consulting firm in glitzy Newport Beach, CA. But then, I got convicted of my own superficiality and greed, including how much money I spent on ties. And I started learning a lot from God while I was leading a small group Bible study, folks at my church, and caring for the people. I started enjoying caring for people, and had to ask, “Why is that, God?” Something always happens where we tend sheep. We learn about sheep. And we learn about ourselves. Moses had to go back and do a lot of work, a lot of internal work.

Climbing Mountains is Character Building

Second, climbing mountains is a metaphor for you developing the type of character God calls us to have. God burns it inside of us. Back in Egypt, when Moses wanted to lead a revolt, but not necessarily to lead a people in worshipping God, and bearing the likeness of God.

God has a commandment, “You shall not murder.” Moses had to get to the place internally where he could say, “Okay, I agree; back then, I was wrong.” That took some part of the 40 years. But that’s not all. Moses also had to get to the point of saying to God, “Not only do I agree, I will teach this to other people.” That took part of the 40 years. But that’s not all. Moses had to get to the point where he could go back to Egypt, where people are trying to murder him, and not retaliate but trust God instead. That took part of the 40 years. But that’s not all. Moses also had to get to the point of saying to God, “I will write down my mistake for everyone to read. I will not excuse myself, or defend myself.” That took part of the 40 years. That is what it meant for Moses to be climbing a mountain, metaphorically, for 40 years.

When you physically climb mountains, you’re definitely working on yourself. It’s like fasting but it’s also the opposite of fasting. I think that’s a helpful contrast for those of you who do spiritual practices. With fasting, you challenge your body to go without food for a little bit. There are health benefits to doing that, but the idea is to benefit your spiritual health. Your spirit exerts strength over your appetite or your sweet tooth or your craving for red meat or whatever. And you use the feeling of craving to remind yourself that you need Jesus. “I crave this, but I really need Jesus,” and then you pray and worship. It’s part of developing a desire for him. With mountain climbing, you challenge your body in a different way. It’s not a denial; it’s a development. It’s not abstaining from something; it’s engaging with something.

Studies have shown that kids who play sports have a healthier relationship with their bodies overall. That includes behaviors that are actually not healthy for their bodies, including sleeping enough and eating healthy, but also including not drinking alcohol and not having sex. In the U.S. context in general, I've seen studies showing that playing sports produces healthier attitudes towards the body than being part of church youth groups, in general. But in biblical times, actual mountain climbing is the sport you did with God. Again, as Christians today, we read that as a metaphor. As we grow with Jesus in our character, spiritual fitness is like physical fitness. And obviously physical fitness still matters. But I want you to appreciate that in biblical times, God gave people a physical fitness challenge. It wasn't just about how we think or how we feel. Sometimes, what we do changes how we think and how we feel. We become less complaining, for instance.

Working on yourself is like climbing a mountain, metaphorically. What are you working on with God? That's so important because we sometimes feel like God has us on a treadmill. "God, why have I been on this treadmill for 40 years? Are you punishing me, or what?" I don't think God punishes us for punishment's sake. He develops us. God is not backward-looking. He is forward-looking. He is saying, "We have to develop you." There are far more important things ahead. I want you to be ready. What you did back there shows what we need to do to train you. But it's not about the past. It's about the future. It's not punishment. It's training. It's training. There is always someone or something to care for. It's the plants in your garden. It's the pet. It's children -- even if you're a young person, there are always children younger than you. And God can use that as training, if you are open to learning. Climbing a mountain is a metaphor for God teaching us about leadership, and how to care well for life.

Climbing Mountains Helped People Glimpse Eden

And that leads me to the third and last point: For Moses, climbing mountains helped him know God was climbing down mountains, searching for him. What do I mean by that? Well, when God appeared as the fire in the burning bush next to Mount Sinai, or perhaps even on Mount Sinai, I want you to imagine what that looked like. If Moses knew the old stories, and I think he did know them, he knew about the garden of Eden, where Eden was the first mountain, a mountain with four rivers cascading down in waterfalls, spreading out all over the world. They were pathways God made for humanity made to spread the garden -- the beauty of God's garden -- so that human beings could come back to the source of all the life, all the beauty. It's there, with God, on that mountain. Moses knew about God with sadness kicking Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden so that we would not eat from the tree of life while we were in a corrupted state, and make the sin immortal in our bodies. So I'm sorry, you're going to have to leave, and you're going to have to die. But Jesus will come, and he will heal human nature and give it back to you. So even exile and death were God's love. Moses knew about God came down from Eden appearing as a flaming sword guarding the way back to the garden and back to the mountain (Gen.3:22 - 24). God was saying that He needs to burn away and cut away something in us before He opens the door again, for our good. He wants to do the surgery of flame but we need to agree.

So when God shows up as the fire in the burning bush, next to Mount Sinai, Moses sees this, and thinks, "I heard the old stories. This is the way back." Moses has been to this mountain thousands of times with sheep over the course of 40 years. Everyday, it's the same thing. But one day, God shows up. And He doesn't just show up, He transfigures the place so that it's the way back to Eden. The bush is the acacia thornbush of the desert, says Acts 7. So God is present in the thorns of the cursed creation, a creation cursed because of humanity. God is here as a fire. Mount Sinai is now Mount Eden. The way to Eden -- the way back home -- is behind the fire and through the fire. God wants to purify a people for Himself, to offer them the surgery of fire. Bring them here, Moses!

When Moses brought Israel back to Mount Sinai, this is what happened, in Exodus 19:18: "Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire." All of Mount Sinai became a burning bush. God said, "Israel, come up onto the mountain. Let Me purify you as you climb the mountain, as you work out your legs, as you come to Me and trust Me." And Israel said, "No. Moses, you climb the mountain instead of us." Wait: That wasn't the plan.

So, Moses did go up. Moses did meet with God. God did purify Him. God did make Moses' face shine with glory (Ex.34). God turned Moses into a burning bush. God put the fire in Moses. But as for the rest of the Israelites, a long series of disappointments began that day.

For Moses, it was more mountain climbing, with a new set of sheep. Looking down and seeing the people acting like sheep. Climbing up and climbing down the mountain going between heaven and earth, God and the people. But it was FULL OF GOD. It was a physical and spiritual exercise of becoming more like God and burning more of God into His own character. Moses became a shepherd of people, because God is shepherd of people. Ultimately, God would burn His way into human flesh in Jesus to become the greatest shepherd. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:1 – 21). God's Son came down the mountain to lead us by the Spirit back up to the Father. So God can put a burning bush in your routine, in your everyday growing, and turn it into the way back to Eden. That burning bush is Jesus in your life.

Illus: Here are two examples of a burning bush today. My friend -- I'll call him Mark -- was trying to walk with Jesus. He was dating a young woman. Their relationship was going well. He had a rhythm of prayer that Jesus entered into one day. That day was a sad day. Mark made a bad choice. He had dinner with an ex-girlfriend. They had too much to drink. They slept together that night. Mark woke up the next morning, horrified. He went to a nearby park. He knelt down in the dirt. He wept. And Jesus met him. It was a burning bush moment, because of his rhythms of prayer, of trying to be intimate with Jesus, were suddenly lit up with fire, leading him to climb the mountain of Mount Eden, back to the Father. It was transformational from that point.

Illus: Here is the second example of a burning bush. Ming and I got married in 1999, and I moved from California to Boston. We began an argument that lasted five years. I felt like I had no friends here in Boston. I felt alone. I felt afraid. I felt resentment. I was looking for a new job, which brought me some anxiety. Did I make a mistake moving? Did I make a mistake getting married? My usual rhythm was to be in Sunday corporate worship. One day, the worship team sang the song, "Be still for the presence of the Lord, the holy one, is here." And I felt an intense warmth on my chest, like, on my heart. Like Jesus was putting his finger on my heart. It was a burning bush moment, leading me to climb Mount Eden, back to the Father.

It does happen. We don't know when it's going to happen. But it usually happens in the midst of spiritual rhythms. God sends you on a mission to get people delivered so they can worship, too. But probably other people will disappoint you like the Israelites disappointed Moses. But that's what we expect, and it's not the point anyway. The point is that you will climb the mountain, and grow as a shepherd, because Jesus is a good shepherd. The point is that you will climb the mountain and be purified of your resentments, your weaknesses, as God's glory shines out through you.

So I'd like us to take a minute of silence, as spiritual practice. God says, "Take off your sandals; this is holy ground." Moses might have thought, "I've been here before." But this time is different. God says, "Linger here; don't be in a rush, don't look like you're ready to leave; slow down; get off your phone; give Me your heart." This is mountain climbing. It's pushing yourself to engage with God, because the next mountain will be higher, and even more rewarding.