

Valley Time!  
Luke 9:28-36

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Have you ever done any hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains or in the Blue Ridge Mountains? Have you done any hiking along that part of the Appalachian Trail? North GA, western NC, eastern TN, southwestern VA? Has anyone done any hiking in this part of the country?

I've done some hiking in this area and there's one thing no one ever thinks to tell you, but you learn it pretty quick: hiking in the mountains means spending a LOT of time in the valley. I mean a LOT of time in the valley. Yes, you spend time on mountaintops but getting there means spending a LOT of time walking to them from way down in the valley.

Valleys are good. Don't get me wrong. Spending time in the valleys is important. The walking is easier. It's easier to talk to the people around you. There's shade and water. No water on the mountaintops.

But I gotta tell you, those mountaintops are great. The view, the breeze. There's a sense of calm and at the same time a psychological rush. It's like being close to God. It is like being close to God.

Once you've been there you understand why, in the ancient world, shrines to the gods were put in the 'high places'. That's where they experienced God. In the Ancient World, anytime someone is climbing a mountain it's almost always because they want to experience God. They want to be closer to God.

That idea is still around today. You see it in a lot of older churches. Those of you who remember our old church, the one that burned, will remember the front steps. Why were they there? What's the point? Because somewhere in their collective memory was this understanding that going up meant drawing closer to God. Climb these steps and you will be closer to God.

In our Scripture Lesson, Jesus and three of his disciples hike up to the top of a mountain. Luke's readers would have understood

they are going up to God. And, they're not disappointed. They see Moses and Elijah, the personification of the Law and the Prophets. The message is clear – Jesus is the culmination, the supreme combination of the Scriptures. He IS the Law and the Prophets.

Not only that, Jesus changes before them. He becomes dazzlingly white which means he's divine. Again, this is the Ancient World. They don't have Wal-Mart. You can't run out and buy a gallon of bleach. In the Ancient World, anytime someone is dazzlingly white it means they are divine.

And then, God speaks. God speaks to them from a cloud just the way God spoke to Moses in a cloud when the Israelites were wandering in the Wilderness for 40 years. God's message is clear. Jesus is God's Son.

This is a wonderful, mountaintop experience. The disciples have had a taste of heaven, right there. They have had a glimpse, a taste of the wonder to come.

But then, they have to go down. They may not want to but they have to. In this world we don't live on mountaintops. In this world, most of our time is spent in the valley.

This Wednesday, we enter into the Valley of Lent. Lent always gets a bad rap. I like Lent. It's a chance to catch our breath. It's a chance to reset our priorities. Lent is about withdrawing from worldly activities and resting in the shade of contemplation and prayer. Lent is about refreshing ourselves with the cool waters of Scripture. Personally, I think Lent is a wonderful time.

In some ways, our interim period is a bit like Lent. It's time in the valley. It's a time of self-review, taking stock of who we are. Over the course of our interim time, we'll look back at where we've been as a congregation. How have we changed in the last 20 years? Who are we now? What is distinctive about us today? Where does God want us to go? Which mountaintop does God want us to climb next? Once we've done that, we'll be able to decide what kind of pastor we want. What kind of skills does our next pastor need in order to lead us where we think God wants us to go?

Once the team is in place, we can expect the self-review to take about six months, give or take. It's slow, methodical, one foot in front of the other kind of work. It's valley work. Valley work.

In my experience there are two great mistakes congregations make during the interim process. The first is trying to take a

shortcut. Instead of following the winding trail of the valley they try cutting across country in a straight line. That's a good way to get lost. I've been lost on the Appalachian Trail and trust me no one wants that!

The other mistake they make is never finishing the process. They never get to the top of the mountain. They glance up, think they've gone far enough and head back down. The problem, of course, is it's only when you get to the top you can decide where you need to go next.

The interim process is not a mountaintop experience. It's valley work. But we have something to sustain us. Like the disciples who had that taste of eternity, we have something to sustain us. We've been to the mountaintop before. We know about being a strong and healthy church. We know about having the right pastor and doing the right ministries. We know about being in the presence of the divine.

Beloved – with confidence and joy let's leave the mountaintop and enter our valleys. We've seen Jesus in his divinity and heard the Holy Voice. Like the disciples, we know Jesus is the true Son of God.

So now, let's take one last look around, pick up our packs, admire the view, and confidently make our way down. Knowing God is with us let's head down into this wonderful time of study, prayer and contemplation. This time of learning more about ourselves and how much God loves us. Amen.