

Walking Downhill

The co-founder of the Maryknoll Fathers, the religious group I joined after college in my Roman Catholic days, left behind his cilice, a barbed wire like wrap, maybe six inches wide, that he wore tightly, everyday, around his thigh.

That spiritual relic is one of the more extreme examples of what you might call uphill spirituality.

Maryknoll was founded in 1912, just 10 years after the founding of our St. Elizabeth's, and the uphill spirituality of the day said that suffering, including, and perhaps especially, self-inflicted suffering, ought to be part of the daily life of a religious person.

His cilice is on display in the small museum kept at the seminary, even though that form of devotion has lost much of its appeal.

Uphill spirituality may be on the minds of many of you as we prepare to enter Lent once again in just a few days.

It's uphill spirituality that sees us giving up chocolate or wine or some other form of self-denial.

And in a culture where so many of us can have what we want when we want it for no better reason than we do want it, the discipline that comes with uphill spirituality is a useful walking stick on one's path of spiritual growth.

Certainly Jesus spent time with uphill spirituality: just think of his 40 days in the desert, the many early mornings up before dawn, praying in deserted places, and of course, the longest uphill journey of all, to Golgotha, to the cross; all of these belong to uphill spirituality.

Uphill spirituality is very focused on the self, on discipline, on personal transformation.

It is a necessary aspect of any life devoted to God.

And yet, today's gospel lesson, the story, the vision, of what we call The Transfiguration, it is about something else; call it perhaps, downhill spirituality.

If uphill spirituality is often about self-sacrifice, self-control and self-denial, downhill spirituality is often about reaching out, and letting go, and acceptance.

As always, context is key.

With our weekly bite sized pieces of scripture each week, it's often easy to lose the context.

Here's what's happening today.

Just before today's gospel lesson, Peter is dressing down Jesus after Jesus tells Peter that the Messiah will suffer, die and rise again.

While Peter has thrown it all in for Jesus, leaving family, friends and job to follow him (all a beautiful testament to uphill spirituality), Peter is really struggling with the rug that downhill spirituality pulls out from under him; pulls out from each and every one of us.

Just before today's lesson, Jesus asks Peter: "who do the people say I am?"

Peter does a good job: "You are the Messiah."

However, when Jesus tells Peter what that means, when he talks about what's coming: the suffering, the cross, the dying and rising, Peter starts pulling his hair out, finally erupting that Jesus is out of his mind.

You see, none of Peter's uphill spirituality prepares him for God's way to rescue us: a rescue planned not with power and reason and logic and strength, but a rescue that demands surrender and acceptance and, yes, a sense of utter foolishness.

So up they go to the mountaintop.

At first, it's just them, and looking around as one might peer at a shiny lake in the daylight; they see only the surface in the glare of the sunlight, all they see is what's in front of them: a few men and a dusty hill top.

Then the cloud appears, and just as a cloud erases the glare of the lake's surface, allowing us to see clear through to the bottom, in all its depths, with all its wonders; so too this cloud reveals Jesus for who he really is; in all his glory, the last and greatest chapter of God's revelation to humanity.

It is a vision of pure grace.

It is the gift of downhill spirituality.

The spirituality that simply is; that accepts what comes; whatever that may be; in confidence that in all that comes; God is God; God is faithful.

And the words that come from the Father are short and sweet:

"Listen to him."

Listen to the beloved who just got done telling you about the cross; about dying to live; about giving it all in order to receive all.

Listen to him!

C.S. Lewis, the wonderful English professor and author of *Mere Christianity* and the *Screw Tape Letters* and the *Narnia* series says this:

“Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true is of infinite importance: the only thing that it cannot be is moderately important.”

That is the intersection at which we arrive today, standing on that hilltop with Peter, with James, with John.

Like them, we have spent lots of time wandering about with the feeling that this Jesus is at least moderately important.

For some reason, that feeling seems to be the natural by-product of uphill spirituality; since uphill spirituality so often leans back on our own wits, our own power, our own strength.

And so we, like the disciples then, spend lots of time admiring Jesus, taking down the rules and regulations that we believe will keep us in good stead with Jesus, and hoping for the benefits that come with being on the winning team.

But today, only days before we enter into the Lenten season of reflection, repentance, and renewal, only hours after Jesus has explained that the way of life is the way of the cross, God says to them, says to us, LISTEN TO HIM!

Listen to what?

To these radical notions that to get, we are called to give it all away?

To the sweet sounding but totally unrealistic invitation to really, actually, trust God in matters of personal well being, in matters of national defense, with our lives, and the lives of those most dear to us?

“LISTEN TO HIM!,” says the voice from the cloud, and we, with Peter, respond:

“How about some nice chapels?!”

Mark often holds up the apostles as really slow learners, almost dense sometimes; perhaps because Mark knows that we too are often very slow learners, we too seem to be dense when it comes to what the gospel message is, and what it calls us to become.

There stands Jesus, clothed in glory, conferring with Moses and Elijah, and Peter can't even recognize Jesus as “Lord” or “Messiah.”

Did you hear it during the lesson, how he, in the midst of all this glory, still sees him as just “Rabbi,” just another teacher, just someone else with good advice.

Peter's not alone.

Throughout Mark's gospel you will not hear a single apostle, you will not hear a single disciple, indeed you will not hear a single human being, save one, who names Jesus as the Son of God.

It's only the demons who know him, until, at the very end, after Jesus breathes his last, a Roman soldier knows him for who he is, blurting out in half-disbelief: “Surely this is the Son of God.”

Slow disciples.

Dense disciples.

Don't feel bad if we are in their company.

Non-violence and love of enemies, love of those who aren't like us; forgiving (especially when we are in the right); letting go of possessions and letting go of control; these are not natural human traits, but they are the fruit of downhill spirituality.

They are the qualities one needs to develop in order to live a life contented in the kingdom of God.

Without those qualities, the kingdom of God could very well feel like hell.

So as you prepare for your lent, be sure to take your dose of uphill spirituality.

Denial and discipline, to be sure, are good for the soul.

But be sure to spend time practicing downhill spirituality as well; that openness of heart to the outsider; that naive trust in God's gentle love; that desire to have no desire at all, but to sit, empty, in the presence of God, asking only that God lead the way.

And let this be our hope, as we join with the man who said: "I want to be a good man. And I want to hear a voice say to me someday, "I take you in and I bless you, because you tried."
MLK,Jr.

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