

Walking Uphill

The co-founder of the Maryknoll Fathers, the religious group I joined in my Roman Catholic days, left behind his 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, and perhaps especially, self-inflicted suffering, ought to be part of the daily life of a religious person.

That device was on display in the small museum kept at the seminary, and it gave me the heebie jeebies every time I passed by it.

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

Lent is the 40 day season that tries to mirror the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert before beginning his active ministry, and it is a season that most commonly sees us giving up chocolate or wine or engaging in some other form of self-denial.

That kind of discipline is, compared to the barbed wire wrap, a milder form of uphill spirituality.

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.

In addition to his 40 days in the desert, how many mornings was he up before dawn, all on his way to the longest uphill journey of all, to Golgotha, to the cross.

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

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

And yet today, as we encounter the vision of The Transfiguration, another kind of spirituality beckons to us; call it perhaps, downhill spirituality.

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

Allow me to explain.

Immediately before today's gospel lesson, Peter confronts Jesus after Jesus tells Peter that the Messiah will suffer, die and rise again.

While Peter has left everything for Jesus, family, friends and job (all a beautiful testament to uphill spirituality), Peter is really struggling with the rug that downhill spirituality pulls out from under him; and 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 about what's coming: the suffering, the cross, the dying and rising, Peter starts pulling his hair out, telling Jesus that he is out of his mind.

You see, none of Peter's uphill spirituality prepares him for God's way to rescue us: a rescue carried out not with power and logic, but a rescue that comes through surrender and forgiveness.

Weighed in the balance of our common sense, most folks call it utter foolishness.

So up they go to the mountaintop.

At first, it's just them, and looking around as one might look at a lake reflecting sunlight; seeing only the surface of things, all they see is a dusty hill top and few men.

But here comes a cloud, and just as clouds erase the glare of the lake's surface, allowing us to see into the depths; so this cloud reveals Jesus in his depths, in his glory, the last and greatest chapter of God's revelation to humanity.

It is a vision of pure grace: they don't earn it, deserve it or expect it.

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 and God is faithful.

And the words that come from the Father are short and sweet: "Listen to him!"

Listen as he tells you about the cross; about dying to live; about giving up everything so that you may obtain everything.

Listen to him!

C.S. Lewis says:

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

And there we stand, on the hilltop with Peter, James and John.

Like them, we figure Jesus is at least moderately important.

That is the natural by-product of uphill spirituality; which relies so much on our own wits, our own power, our own strength.

And so we, like the disciples, are good at admiring Jesus, following the rules that we hope keep us in good stead with Jesus, hoping for the benefits that come with being on the winning team.

But today, God says to them, says to us, LISTEN TO HIM!

Listen to what?

Listen to the radical truth that what we have: our homes, our money, are not really ours after all, but held by us in trust to be used for the people of God.

Listen to the totally unrealistic invitation to trust God in matters of personal well being, in matters of national defense, with our lives, even with the lives of those dearest to us.

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

"How about some nice chapels?!"

The author of Mark's gospel is typically not kind to the disciples.

They are thick headed and slow to figure out where Jesus is coming from.

I for one am glad for that.

I too am a slow learner, I too am dense when the gospel message comes knocking at my door.

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

In the midst of all this glory, Peter still sees Jesus as just "Rabbi," just another teacher, just another guy with some good advice.

Peter's not alone.

Throughout Mark's gospel you will not hear one 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, as Jesus breathes his last, a Roman soldier — a pagan for Pete's sake! — **gets** 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; forgiving (especially when we are in the right); letting go of possessions and letting go of control; caring for the undeserving poor, 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 be happy in the kingdom of God.

Without those qualities, the kingdom of God — might feel like hell!

So as you prepare for your lent, take your dose of uphill spirituality if you must.

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

But be sure to practice downhill spirituality too; that openness of heart to the outsider; that naïve 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 for God to lead the way.

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