

Tears on the Mountain
II Samuel 15:13-14, 23, 30; Luke 19:28-29, 41-44;
Genesis 22:1-14
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Last week, I raved to you about how wonderful the mountains are as a place of refuge, insisting that they provide solace for those in tough spots. That, of course, is only a small piece of what the mountains are, and the truth is that wherever there are peaks there are also valleys. The mountaintop stories in our Bible and in our lives may include some exhilarating, life-giving examples, but they inevitably also include tales of despair and challenge.

Three of those stories are featured in our scripture this week, two of which bear a striking resemblance to one another. Roughly a thousand years apart, we have stories of both David and Jesus ascending the same mountain, the Mount of Olives, and weeping as they walk. It is a fascinating image. I've spent a lot of time hiking up steep paths, sometimes exhausted or in physical pain, often surrounded by others who were exhausted or in pain, and I can't remember a single time when someone was weeping as he hiked. And yet here in our scripture, we've got stories where two of the most critical figures of our faith are crying as they climb.

Both of these stories require some context to understand them. First, from II Samuel, the David story depicts a king fleeing his kingdom while his son, Absalom, usurps the throne. David has loyal followers who accompany him and even more who pledge their support while continuing about the king's business in their own homes and towns. He is not alone...and still, he seems to feel desolate. He has lost much of what he has known and built. He is in mourning.

The scripture tells us three things about his climb: he is weeping, his head is covered, and he is barefoot. All three of these things emphasize that David is not only grief-stricken but also contrite, casting his fate in the hands of God.¹ This is not a political or military strategy; this is a man who acknowledges that all he has left is faith in God.

The impression we get is that David is climbing a mountain to repent, although it isn't quite clear from what (and with David, there are multiple possibilities). I imagine him taking each step slowly, heavily, urging his legs to carry him upward without guarantee of what awaits at the top. This is no easy jaunt but rather a guilt-ridden walk of shame.

The Mount of Olives is the appropriate place for him to walk a path of atonement, because admitting the need to ask forgiveness is a long, arduous haul. We do not confess our shortcomings lightly. We would rather pretend they are figments of our imagination than to speak them into existence. Acknowledging our mistakes, in word or through actions, causes their reality to weigh us down. David is walking that weighty walk. He is facing the challenge of contrition...and so he cries.

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¹ Birch, Bruce C. "I & II Samuel" *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, 1325.

When Jesus climbs the Mount of Olives a thousand years later, he is in nearly the opposite place. He is not fleeing adversaries but instead comes to the mountain off of the parade and hosannas of Palm Sunday. He is not a defeated man looking to turn things around but rather a triumphant success...who is about to face trial, persecution, and death. He, too, is crying.

He is crying for Jerusalem, for a city that has failed to recognize a path toward peace despite the fact that its very name contains the Hebrew word for peace. He is weeping, undoubtedly, for the souls who call that city home, perhaps during his time and beyond, perhaps even beyond that city...perhaps, even, for us. But the scriptures are clear that he is crying for others, aware of the suffering and loss and challenge that they will soon face.

The scriptures are less clear about this, but I suspect he is also feeling the weight of the challenge that is soon coming his way as well. We have every indication that he knows the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion are coming. We have seen him troubled before by the fate that awaits him, and we will see him troubled by it again. Given what he will endure, I suspect that Jesus, like David, walked slowly. Purposefully. Heavily. Despite the fact that he and David are starting their walks in very different emotional places, they end up trudging uphill at the same pace. They are both approaching a mountain of challenge.

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I would wager, however, that their walks and their tears don't even begin to compare to the climb featured in our third scripture reading this morning. It is a scripture that continues to vex us today—in fact, I heard this story just last week: a friend of mine was hiring a new teacher for her preschool, and for the interview she asked the candidate to bring in some materials that the candidate might use as a teacher. The candidate showed up with worksheets and flashcards, each of them emphasizing a different fundamental skill that students would want to pick up before heading off to kindergarten.

My friend said the materials were okay but that they didn't really give her a lot of insight into the candidate...until she came to a worksheet that taught the letter "I." To do so, it featured "Isaac," outlined in black and white and awaiting a child's crayons. Unfortunately, it featured Isaac tied up on an altar and shaking with fear, Abraham standing above him with a cartoon sword, and a cute sheep over in the corner. My friend asked the candidate if maybe this particular image might not be the best one for a child to spend hours staring at and coloring, and the candidate shrugged and said, "no, I don't see anything wrong with it," and that was the end of the interview.

As my friend told me later, "I don't even like that story, and there's no way I want a room full of four-year-olds fixated on it and then going home wondering if Dad is going to come after them with a sword."

We can probably wrap our brains around David's retreat of penitence and Jesus' preparation for his final week. We'd rather not even think about Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah.

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The big question with this passage from Genesis, of course, is "What on earth is God thinking?" It is an important question to address, despite the fact that it's not going to have a satisfying answer. I'm sorry to disappoint, but this morning, thinking about challenging climbs, I'm actually more concerned with what Abraham is thinking.

I'm concerned with what he's thinking because of a small detail, one so tiny that it's easy to miss: after God tells Abraham to make this horrific sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac and the two workers walk *for three days*. The journey to Mount Moriah is not a quick one. All during that walk, Abraham has to be pondering what God has asked him to do. He must be having second thoughts, must be offering prayers begging to be let off the hook, and must be burdened with the enormity of what God has said to him. If David and Jesus were carrying a heavy weight during their mountain ascents, Abraham's must have been a hundred times heavier.

The Bible does not tell us whether or not Abraham cried...but I refuse to believe that a loving father wouldn't at least shed tears in his heart, even if he remained stoic outwardly.

I don't know if this story proves that Abraham was faithful or crazy. Maybe he's both. But when I read it, I do see him as a man facing an enormous challenge, one that doesn't appear to have a path to escape. He seems to be confronting this challenge alone—Sarah is conspicuously absent from this story, Abraham sidesteps his son when Isaac questions him, and Abraham leaves his entourage behind as the journey nears its conclusion.

I don't know what Abraham was thinking...but I do believe that his mind was racing, fervently seeking truth in the midst of a chaotic conundrum, praying for strength and wisdom to do what was right...whatever that actually was.

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Three men, all of them hugely important. Three mountain hikes, all of them lonely. Three burdens, all of them different.

David is facing a burden that is connected to his past. He is fleeing an enemy in fear, mourning the estrangement of his son, and repenting for sins that cannot be undone. Although his head is bowed down, he is looking backward. He may wish for forgiveness and restoration at some point in the future, but he doesn't have a clear plan or a certain hope that these things will come his way. The challenge he faces is a challenge of loss that has already occurred, mistakes that have already been made.

Jesus is facing the burden of the future. He knows what lies ahead, both for him and for Jerusalem. It is a future of war, of treachery, of pain, of death. He might prefer to be like David and look backward, because there he would find a celebration, but instead he knows that he must look ahead for the challenge that is coming.

And Abraham is facing a burden in the present, one that has accosted him in the form of a message from God and that will not go away until he has seen it through to the end, whatever that end may be. It is a dilemma that attacks him with every step, every breath, every thought as he slowly makes his way to the place that God has shown him.

When we confront challenge, we are often like all three of these men at the same time. Our challenges push us toward mourning and contrition because of our pasts, strike us with fear and sadness over the paths we know we must walk in the future, and consume and paralyze us in the present. These three stories combine to illustrate fully the figurative mountains in our lives.

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Abraham, David and Jesus have one other thing in common in their walks: they do not go to these mountains to escape or solve their challenges. They approach these mountains to receive their challenges. David hikes to express his grief and sin, not to assuage them; Jesus looks out over Jerusalem to soak in its forthcoming sorrow, not to rise above it; Abraham's journey to Moriah is a trip of pain, not a trip to resolve pain.

Last week, I suggested that our mountaintop experiences are ones that salvage us in the midst of disaster, but these are not stories where characters climb mountains to overcome difficulty. They climb mountains to encounter difficulty, difficulty that God is directing them toward.

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We live in a world that prefers to escape difficulty at all costs. We shop online because it's easier than going to a store; we communicate via email and text because it's simpler than a letter or a phone call; we have 24-hour grocery stores, pay at the pump gas stations, drive-thru pharmacies, and the internet at our fingertips all in the name of convenience. We are taught to avoid challenge, which makes it all the harder to argue for embracing it.

In September of 1962, President Kennedy gave a speech at Rice University that would echo throughout the rest of the decade. It's the speech where he lays out the goal of sending a man to the moon before the end of the Sixties, a goal America would meet despite the fact that Kennedy wasn't alive to see it. Trying to explain why America should pursue this goal, he lays out a logical and persuasive argument built on ideals like the knowledge gained and the peace attainable.

This is one moral of the scripture Luther read this morning: we take on challenges to improve ourselves and our world. Like David, we recognize the value of mourning and penitence, even though they are hard. Like Jesus, we know that it is easier to care only about ourselves and yet we insist upon caring about others, even though it is hard. We are willing to shed tears while embracing a challenge because we know it makes us better people, individually and collectively. We want a God who wants us to be better people.

This is not one of the morals from the Genesis passage. Abraham and his motives are reflected not in a logical argument but rather in the most-quoted section of Kennedy's speech, the part that comes after he's explained the advances in science and technology and community that can come from pursuing the moon, the part where he says this:

But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.²

² John F. Kennedy, "Moon Speech," Rice University, September 12 1962. <https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>

Abraham chooses to climb his mountain not because it is easy but precisely because it is hard. He believes that it will “organize and measure the best of his energies and skills,” even if he doesn’t understand how it will do these things the way David and Jesus understand the points of their respective climbs. Abraham chooses the moon.

We live in a world that champions the convenient, but we are not, as humans created in the image of God, wired this way. Each of us, in different ways, deep inside relishes the opportunity to climb a mountain. We pray the motto of the summer camp where I worked: “God, give us hills to climb...and the strength to climb them.” We are David, and Jesus, and even Abraham...even if the moment of challenge makes us weep.

When I pray, the two things I pray the most for are comfort and challenge. I do not want a God who is constantly putting me through the ringer, a God who seems uncaring when I am hurting, or a God who primarily makes me anxious. But I also don’t want a God who is complacent, a God who seems unconcerned with whether or not I grow, or a God who doesn’t respect me. Challenge goes hand-in-hand with caring, with growth, and with respect. It is essential to who we are as humans and essential to any worthwhile relationship, including our relationship with God.

Church, done right, is never easy. It includes moments of grief, confession, and heart-wrenching empathy. It includes listening intentionally for the word of God that frankly we might rather not hear in the first place. It includes crying as we climb...because it must include all of these things to be real, to be both comforting and challenging, to allow for caring, growth, and respect.

Near the end of Kennedy’s speech, he references George Mallory, the British explorer who first attempted to climb Mount Everest. When Mallory was asked “Why climb Everest?” he responded “Because it is there.” Why do we seek the community of Christ and a better, more perfect relationship with God? For the same reason.