Sunday, February 23, 1986
THE JOURNEY UP THE MOUNTAIN AND DOWN (No. 2 in a Series: On the Road with Jesus)
Luke 9:28-36

In many ways, life is a journey. From the time we are born into this world until the time we die, each one of us is on a journey through time. We have our outward journeys as we physically grow, mature, and move from one place to another. We grow up, we leave home, we go to school, we go to work, we change jobs, we move from one town, city, county, or state to somewhere else. Always we are on a journey from birth to death.

We also have our inward journeys. We mentally grow and mature and change. Our beliefs change, we discover new ideas. We see the world differently. We experience new people. We leave some old ideas behind. We encounter new problems and new joys. Our interests change. A large part of this inward journey is spiritual. We come to understand there's more to life than the eye can see or the ear can hear. We encounter and experience mystery. Along our spiritual journeys, we come to know ecstasy and tragedy.

On this journey called life, we never travel alone, although sometimes we try. There are always others who travel with us, whether we know it or not. As we learned in kindergarten, it's better to hold hands and stick together. And God is always with us. As the psalmist put it:

"O God, you have searched me and know me… Whither shall I go from your spirit? Or whither shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, you are there." (Psalm 139)

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. In each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand — one belonging to him and the other to God. When the last scene flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and noticed that many times along the path there was only one set of footprints in the sand. He also noticed that this happened during the lowest and saddest times in his life. This bothered him, so he questioned God.

"God, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you the most, you deserted me?" God replied, "My precious child, I would never desert you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

God does carry us at times, and others carry us as well, and we carry others. Sometimes in our journey, our outward and inward ones, we reach plateaus. There are starts and stops, hills and valleys. Sometimes the travel is easy-going, and sometimes it's a struggle. As in all journeys, we need a certain amount of baggage, but we can carry too much baggage, and we have to learn along the way what to keep with us and what to leave behind; what is necessary baggage and what is excess.

There are also times when we get lost on our journey and we wander aimlessly with no sense of direction or destination. We go through the motions of living.

The Bible is filled with stories of outward and inward journeys of faith, from Abraham to Moses to Jesus to Paul and other leaders in the early church. During this season of Lent, we are looking especially at the journeys of Jesus as a way of looking at and receiving guidance and strength for our own journeys.

Like Jesus, we have to leave home and make our own way with the help of others. And leaving home is both a physical and spiritual journey. This morning, we are going to look especially at another part of the spiritual journey of Jesus after he left home, although that journey began long before he left home.

Jesus' spiritual journey, like ours, began at birth. It was nourished in a home where religious faith was central. He learned first about God from his parents, then his larger family, the synagogue, and others. At about age 30, he heard the preaching of John the Baptist and was deeply touched by it. He was baptized by John in the River Jordan, and his spiritual journey continued as he wrestled with how he should carry out his ministry.

Soon after, he developed his own group of disciples who joined him on both his inward and outward journey. One day, Jesus took with him three of the disciples on a spiritual journey of prayer. Why only three accompanied him for this time apart, we do not know. Sometimes he went alone. Maybe only three were invited, or perhaps only three accepted the invitation. Some were not yet ready for the next step in their spiritual journey. They trusted in their own strength and didn't need any mountain-top experiences.

Some people are afraid of being transformed or changed in any way. They don't want to risk inner spiritual growth. Who knows where it might lead? You could become tithers to the church or do something else radical.

For some people too, their worries provide their safe boundaries. Their worries keep them from venturing forth or trying anything the least bit different or risky. Afraid of trusting the promise of an oasis, they defend the merits of the desert. We get stuck in our spiritual journeys and don't want to move on.

It could be too that the other disciples had been with Jesus at other times when they had gone apart to pray and not much happened. We all have our spiritual dry spells no matter who we are with. Sometimes you've been here in worship and felt that not much happened with you personally. You felt you were only going through the motions.

Our inner journeys of faith have their stops and starts, their peaks and valleys. But Jesus continued with his inner spiritual journey and he took three disciples up the mountain. While there, he was, the Bible says, transfigured before them. What does that mean?

It means the disciples and Jesus had an overwhelming mystical experience — one that cannot adequately be described with any words. For a few moments at least, they experienced the world around them and Jesus in a new way. They felt connected to God, to Jesus, to each other, and to creation in an intense way.

Such moments in our spiritual journeys come sometimes in strange times and places — not always on mountain-tops. The descriptions vary, but underneath are common elements. A physicist named Fritjof Capra recounts such an experience in which he no longer merely believed in a dynamic universe based on his intellectual understanding but knew it to be so. He recalls that he was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves,

feeling the rhythm of his breathing, when he suddenly experienced the whole environment as a cosmic dance — not just a concept of physics, but as an immediate living experience.

In his own words: “I saw cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses. I saw atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound, and at that moment, I knew that was the dance of creation.”

This physicist felt and experienced in a fresh way what he already knew by reason and study. In the same way, the disciples experienced Jesus Christ in a new way, even though they had been with him for a year and a half.

Another individual described her experience this way: “One day, while taking a walk after meditating, I had an electric feeling which lasted about five seconds in which I felt totally integrated with the creative force of the universe. I saw what spiritual transformation was trying to do, what my mission in life was, and several alternative ways I might accomplish it. I chose one and am making it happen.”

Not at all surprising! A study of mystics in every kind of religion through the centuries shows that in a mystical spiritual experience, one feels and senses the connectedness of all creation — everything is a part of the “all” that makes up reality. To see, to understand anything means to first see and understand that it is a part of everything else, that nothing is separate and stands alone. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as the “art of union with reality.”

In the case of Jesus and the three disciples with him, they experienced a new kind of harmony — all was connected and in the present. The Gospels report this by saying they saw Moses and Elijah together with Jesus and a cloud overshadowed them. They saw, in other words, Jesus connected with all past religious experience and history, and with them as well.

To feel utterly alone and not connected to anything is the opposite of a mystical vision. That’s why solitary confinement in a prison can be the worst experience possible. Natan Sharansky, who was released from a Russian prison camp last week, reported that while in solitary, in complete isolation, he kept himself going by reminding himself and thinking of his connections. He kept reciting the Psalms from the Old Testament from memory. He also gained strength from the pages of Jewish history by remembering those who had gone before him. When he had paper, he wrote letters on behalf of other prisoners. He said, “The prisoner who writes such a letter may not save his neighbor in the next cell, but he saves his soul.”

The mountain-top vision was especially important to Jesus. Again, he was assured that God was with him in his ministry. It was so overwhelming for Peter that he wanted to stay there — he wanted to build three booths to capture and keep the vision. Forget the fever and sweat and hard work down in the valley where we have to deal with people, their problems, pains, and complaints. High spiritual times are important for us too, but they cannot be frozen. One cannot stay on the mountain-top forever, we have to come down again.

Our spiritual journeys continue in the everyday world. Sometimes, like Peter, we want to stay in one place too long. But spiritual journeys are up and down. One climbs, one sees, one descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw and experienced higher up.

Jesus led the three disciples down the mountain, back into the middle of life. There they found the remaining disciples attempting to deal with a father and his distraught child. The father quickly ran up to Jesus and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; and I brought him to your disciples and they could not help him.”

The disciples who had not gone with Jesus had tried to be of help to the boy while Jesus and the three others were on the mountain. Jesus had come from a mountain-top experience and now had to deal with sickness in the valley. What a contrast in his spiritual journey — up the mountain and down again.

Jesus said, “Bring the boy to me,” and he healed him. In one of the Gospel stories about this event, the disciples asked Jesus later and privately why they had not been able to be of help to the young man. And Jesus told them—“Because of your little faith.” Only with God’s spirit and power working in and through us can we meet the problems of the world. Jesus’ answer is a caution against dogmatism, church arrogance, and trying to separate ourselves from others.

Up the mountain and down again! That’s an apt description of our spiritual journeys when we follow the pattern of Jesus. Our spiritual lives are not to be static and detached from the everyday world. To be sure, we withdraw from time to time for renewal, but it leads us back into the middle of life.

Through the centuries, several different models of spiritual journeys have existed. One prominent one among English-speaking Protestants has been that of the lead character named “Christian” in John Bunyan’s classic “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Written in prison, this book describes the journey of Christian, a man who meets Evangelist and is sent by him on the way to Heavenly Jerusalem. Leaving his early city, “The City of Destruction,” Christian sets forth upon a lonely and adventuresome pilgrimage. A typical episode has him saying, “So I saw in my dream that the man began to run. Now he had not run so far from his own door, but his wife and children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the man put his fingers in his ears and ran on, crying—‘Life! Life! Eternal Life!’ So he looked not behind him, but fled toward the middle of the plain.”

This model of a spiritual journey emphasizes the individual, solitary aspect of pilgrimage, the uniqueness of each person in his or her relationship to the eternal. It emphasizes the forsaking of this world, this Jerusalem, in favor of the heavenly Jerusalem. However, I believe the model of the spiritual journey which Jesus traveled has a different emphasis. Far from forsaking the affairs of the world, it is a journey of deep commitment to the here and now. And it’s always a journey with others.

Go to the mountain with Jesus, allow yourself to be transformed. Experience the unity, harmony, and beauty of creation. Break through old ways of seeing things; break through old limits; let go of worry and fear. And then do not be afraid to come down the mountain and let your spiritual vision lead you right into the middle of the world’s problems.

And remember on this spiritual journey up the mountain and down, you are never alone. Even in the hells of this world, God is with you. Amen.