

In reality we spend far more time in the valleys than we do on the mountain tops. The mountain tops are fine—often inspirational and moving but our time there is limited. My first journey to Mount Katahdin in Maine took five hours for us to reach the summit from our base camp at Chimney Pond. Once on the summit we had about thirty minutes to eat lunch and enjoy the view before heading back to Chimney Pond. These were wonderful minutes on top of the world (in Maine) and we may have stretched our stay to forty-five minutes, but we had to leave and journey back into the valley. There were moments on the ascent when we wondered if we would make it to the summit – getting there is not always easy. We had enjoyed the vistas but were now heading back into “real life” where we spend most of our time.

One of the titles for Psalm 42 is “Looking for God’s help in distress” or my paraphrase, “Looking for God’s help in the valley.” The Psalmist is feeling that God has deserted him. The question comes from those who know him, who are experiencing the valley with him, “*Where is your God?*” (42:3b). His lament is similar to Gideon’s (which we looked at a few weeks ago). As the angel comes to Gideon threshing grain inside the wine press Gideon’s question is: “If God is with us why are we in such a mess?” The Psalmist raises the same question: “*Why have you forgotten me?*” (42:9). He is experiencing a sense of loss. The valley is getting to him, he longs again for the summit – to be again in the Temple praising God. He has had enough.

I came out of the church one Sunday and there sitting on the steps were too forlorn looking boys. Mom had driven off and left them. Now this was not the first time she had done this, in fact it was somewhat of a common occurrence in their lives. As I sat with them and waited for mom to return (she always did) they asked, “Why does mom forget us all the time?” I had no good response other than, “This is life boys.”

The Psalmist is remembering the former days, the days on the summit. He is remembering when he went to the Temple and joined the festival processions. Things were going good. It was a time of prosperity and success. The tide has turned for a while. Now God seems far away. His prayers go unanswered. There is the long silence of God and the Psalmist is ready to shout: “Enough Already!”

As we begin our study of I Peter we come to promises fulfilled and yet not yet fulfilled. Christ brings new hope, new promises and new expectations. Coming to Christ is a life changing experience but they were not prepared for the “various trials” that came along with this new life in Christ. Can you hear them? I just became a Christian and I lost my job because of it. I just became a Christian and we just lost our home because of it. I just became a Christian and I lost my family. Remember Paul? He was once breathing fire against the church putting the followers of the Way in prison. Did signing on to Christ mean loss of job, home, family? Was this in the fine print of the contract? Do you remember this as part of the bargain?

We got an email from our missionary in Japan, Roberta Stevens. Roberta was asking us to pray for a young Japanese woman who had come to Christ. Her decision to follow Christ meant that her family would disown her. They would now treat her

as being dead. The new life in Christ would place her immediately in what Peter calls the “refiner’s fire.” This new life in Christ was not what she or what Peter’s audience had expected. The promise fulfilled is fulfilled but is not yet fulfilled entirely.

Enough already! We didn’t sign on for this. We signed on for the blessings. The refiner’s fire is not what we had anticipated. Because of this Peter and the Psalmist assure us that the end will be better than the beginning. It is called a “faith journey”. Trials and tribulations will come our way and yet the end is better than the beginning. It is not because of a lack or loss of faith; it is life lived out in the real world. We spend more time in the valley than on the summit.

One of the tragedies of our time is that we do not prepare people for the valleys. We talk about the mountain top. We share the beauty of the vistas, etc. but we forget to tell about the journey to the summit and the return back to the valley. We fail to admit that we never get to spend a long time on the summit. It is not on the summit where life is experienced but in the valleys.

Both the Psalmist and Peter know this first hand. By knowing this first hand they have a message of hope for us when we are in the valleys. It will get better. Did you notice the response of the Psalmist to the valley? “My soul is downcast within me, there I remember you” (42:6). It is when he is in the valley that his thoughts are more directed towards God. It is in the valley where he discovers hope: “*Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God*” (42:11b). He knows restoration will come. He is confident that he again will join the faith community in praise of celebration, in worship. Even as those around him doubt and question, his faith remains confident and strong. He is not sure where or when but he sure God is faithful.

This, too, is Peter’s assurance: “*You are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls*” (1:9). Faith is a process and valleys are as necessary as the mountain tops in the process of our faith development. Valleys can be wonderful places. About ten years ago now we came home from the Philippines for our son’s wedding. We wanted a few days to adjust to the time change and travel prior to the wedding and arranged to spend a few days before the wedding at Ocean Shores, WA. One day we drove north to the Olympic Rain Forest. It was a wonderful day walking through the forest admiring its density, its beauty and the moisture falling from the trees! It was good because the trails were well marked and we knew the direction – most national forests/parks have well marked trails. Because of them our experience in the valley was wonderful. However, in contrast, many the valleys of life have us blazing, not following, the trails! We long for the well-marked trails rather our blazing through unmarked terrain and underbrush.

It is in the valleys that our battles are fought. It is in the valleys where we find loneliness, depression, fear, anxiety, etc. It is in the valleys where we fight. I don’t recall many battles being fought on mountain tops. My uncle served in WWII and endured the Battle of the Bulge. He never said much about it – in fact, I only remember him speaking of the horror of that valley twice. It was all he could do – it was in the valley the battle was waged.

Peter is not unfamiliar with the valleys. Can you imagine those days following his denial of the living Christ? How deep was his valley?

I was with a family as they met with their surgeon. One of the members was in need of drastic surgery. The surgeon simply outlined what he would do and then said that the immediate outcome of the surgery would be greater pain than the patient was now in, pain that could last up to ten days. He would do all he could to limit the pain but for healing to come the pain was necessary. It is the valleys that cause us to cry out, "Enough Already!" But it is also in the valleys where we grow and find hope.

Hear again the words from Peter and the Psalmist – from The Message by Eugene Peterson.

*“Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we’ve been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now. God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you’ll have it all—life healed and whole” (I Peter 1:4-5)*

*“Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God—soon I’ll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He’s my God” (Psalm 42:11)*

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Peterson, Eugene, The Message, Navipress, 202

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989