



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Provisions for the Journey

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 12, 2015
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Amos 7:7-15 and Mark 6:14-29

It was not coincidental that the night following a day-hike in the Canadian Rockies that I had a dream about mountains and climbing.

In the dream I was standing at the foot of a very steep and rocky mountain and I was wearing my vestments as I peered up the landscape of an impossible terrain. Somehow I knew that I was supposed to start climbing. But the mountain was tall and steep.

Needing no introduction, a voice seemed to be saying, "Go ahead; start climbing." "But Lord," I protested, "the mountain is too steep and the path is rocky and full of risk." "You can do it," the voice said back ... "Trust me, I will give you what you need for the journey ... start climbing."

Desperate, I threw up my last defense: "But Lord, I can't climb this mountain, I don't have the right gear, I don't have any help ... I'm all alone ... and besides," I said with an Anglican sniff, "I am wearing all of my vestments."

The Lord was not impressed and the response was swift: "You have everything you need ... trust me."

"I'll never make it, I can't even see the top of the mountain!"

"Don't look at the mountain, just keep your eyes on the next few steps ... I will give you the provisions, people and power you need ... most of all, I will give you myself."

Then the dream ended.

That dream is metaphorical of our lives!

We have so many rocky mountains to climb in life, don't we? Interior mountains, challenging aspects within ourselves, and exterior mountains that stand before us. Mountains of education and vocation. Psychic mountains and spiritual mountains. Mountains of mission and ministry in the face of the heartache of the world. Mountains of prejudice and injustice, of hunger and war, of race and culture. These are not new mountains of human experience; some of them have been with us since Grandmother Eve and Grandfather Adam. Our call is to "start climbing," and climb we shall. And we're promised that we're never alone in the journey.

In the Gospel text of last Sunday, we learned that Jesus sent out the Twelve two by two—to climb some mountains, to be themselves, to announce the Kingdom, to heal the sick and give rest to the weary. There is no hint that those disciples were particularly talented, nor especially gifted, nor extra moral. There is no evidence that they had a higher I.Q. or special aptitude for ministry.

In today's Old Testament text we find the same theme ... This time it's Amos. All he's given to be a major prophet is a plumb line. He was an unlikely candidate from the backwater, rural area of Tekoa. He had no special family background or personal credentials for the job. He was simply given a plumb line to indicate that Israel was out of alignment. What was their difficulty? They were serving two masters: God and wealth. They were attaining great resources on the backs of the poor.

What are the lessons to be learned from these texts?

First, God calls unlikely disciples and prophets ... and God calls them to climb some rocky terrain. God calls uneducated, rural nomads like Amos; God calls Zealots like Simon and Judas; God calls tax collectors like Matthew and Zachaeus; God calls Pharisees like Nicodemus; God calls Essene monastics like John the Baptist; and God calls people like you and me.

God enables them and us to be vessels of grace, even when we don't measure up, even when we feel inadequate. The Zenith Television Company used to advertise: "The quality goes in before the name goes on..." A calling to Christian ministry is obviously the opposite of this manner: we are called to carry the name and do the work before there is any refined character or ability. We have the mistaken notion that we have to clean ourselves up, that we need to "shape up" before being called into God's service.

A preacher once asked the rhetorical question to the congregation during a Sunday sermon: "Is there anyone here today who is perfect?" Expecting no response, he proceeded to move to the next point. In an instant, a man stood up in the back. The preacher was startled and haltingly asked out loud, "Sir, are you perfect?" "No," the man replied, "I'm standing up for my wife's first husband."

In the context of God's kingdom, none of us is perfect when we're called into Christian service; we're all half-baked. None of us has "arrived"; we're all in the process of becoming who God made and redeemed us to be.

Mike Yaconelli, a noted national youth leader (and sadly killed in a car accident a few years ago), wrote an important book about this theme. It's titled *Messy Spirituality*. Here's what Mike wrote about himself:

"My life is a mess. After forty-five years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life. I know God is there, somewhere, but it's difficult to make him out in the haze of everyday life... I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Martin Luther King or Billy Graham or Mother Theresa. I just want to be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow into maturity and stability... If I were to die today, I would be worried about what people would say at my funeral. I would be happy if they said things like, "Mike was a nice guy" or "He was occasionally decent, especially to the poor" or "He wasn't as bad as some people." Unfortunately, eulogies are delivered by people who know the deceased. I know what the consensus would be: 'Mike was a mess.'

"When I was younger, I believed my inconsistency was due to my youth. I believed that age would teach me all I needed to know and that when I was older I would have learned the lessons of life and discovered the secrets of true spirituality. I am older now, a lot older, and the secrets are still secret from me. I often dream that I am tagging along behind Jesus, longing for him to choose me as one of his disciples. Without warning, he turns around, looks straight into my eyes, and says, 'start climbing.' "

There's a second lesson we learn from these texts. God prepares them and us for ministry. God gives us what we need for the journey: Authority in God's name; community; a plumb line; scripture, tradition and reason. Oh, there are times when we think we need more, but God sends us out ... "start climbing."

Many years ago, I was the Diocesan Coordinator for all of the Haiti work trips. I went to Haiti many, many times with an assortment of adults and youth from around North Carolina. On one particular trip, a sheltered girl from Winston-Salem signed up. We didn't know her, but we knew of her family heritage: a well-heeled, well-connected family from the region. We learned during our preparation meetings that "Amy" (I've changed her name because of confidentiality) was going to be high maintenance on the trip. She asked questions (about such things as hair dryers and make-up) that led us to believe that she didn't quite understand the full measure of being a good and respectful visitor in a Third World country. All of our instincts were correct. She was a challenge throughout the week. Toward the end of the pilgrimage, she ventured out of our compound (with another teen) and made her way to the Club

Med, the only resort anywhere near our area of Haiti. In the dim light around the pool/spa area, she made the mistake of diving into the shallow end of the pool, thereby making an enormous gash in her head. The physician on our trip spent the next two hours stitching her up. Several days later we made it home, all feeling good about the trip, but not sure that any of the aspects made a difference in the life of Amy. To put it mildly, in our minds, she was the least likely to ever pursue significant ministry.

A number of years later, after moving to another parish church, I received a surprise invitation in the mail. It was a graduation announcement from Amy, letting me know that because of the Haiti mission trip, she had entered and completed studies and preparation to be a Third-World physician at Tulane Medical School. Amy is now the lead physician at an Anglican hospital in Nairobi, Kenya!

William Temple once said about the Anglican Church: "For every forty cups of cold water that we're trying to serve the thirsty, we've got our thumb in ten of them. But, that said, thirty of them are making their mark." Very often we are blessed to be a blessing, and those blessings come in some very unlikely packages.

A number of years ago a memorable blessing came my way—quite unexpectedly and in a very unusual way. I was walking alone on a fairly secluded beach my family and I visit yearly. It was early in the morning, the sun was just coming up, and the sights off in the distance were not yet clear. When I rounded a bend, I could see a person walking toward me, but too far out to get a clear glimpse. As the person drew closer I could tell that it was a young woman, short in stature. As she came within 50 yards I could distinguish some features, but not yet able to see her face. And then yet closer I noticed several things: I could tell that she was smiling, and that she had Down syndrome. I had never seen her before. Suddenly, a surprising thing happened. She began to run towards me, and I could tell that she wasn't going to run by me, but she was in fact running to me—with her arms wide open. As she came near I decided to kneel down so that I would be roughly at her height. She then wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss on the cheek. A total stranger giving me a most surprising morning greeting. And then she ran off, and I never saw her again.

God sends us out to show mercy, to greet everyone as a child of God in need of a blessing, to extend hospitality to strangers, and to bring something of God's grace to everyday life. God gives us provisions for the journey; we are given what we need to do God's work. Can you hear God's voice? "Go ahead, start climbing!"

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