

Down from the Mountain

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Preaching on:
Luke 9:28–43a

We're here at the tail end of Black History Month. We're here at the tail end of Black History Month, and I decided to expand my horizons a little bit. I was realizing in Black History Month, I was thinking about all of the names who weren't the big names. Not the Martin Luther King Jr and the Rosa Parks and the Malcolm X. Who are some of those other names of people from our black history in our country who are very meaningful to me. And I started listing them all out and they were all ministers, poets, novelists, civil rights folks. And I realized, oh, that's just sort of my lane. That's the lane I ride in. And I thought, I want to learn something about somebody completely outside my wheelhouse. And I got interested in learning more about Muhammad Ali, the greatest. I mean, what an interesting individual he was.

Muhammad Ali was not only one of the greatest boxers of all time. He was just one of the greatest sports personalities of all time, a deeply spiritual person, and what a life. In 1960, he won the gold medal in the Olympics. In 1962, he won the Heavyweight Championship. And by 1967, he had been recruited into the army, drafted in the army to go to Vietnam, he became a conscientious objector. He went to court, he was convicted of being a draft dodger, he was sentenced to five years in prison, he was stripped of his heavyweight titles, he

was banned from boxing. Now what an arc that is, and what a personality for it to come from. Muhammad Ali, the greatest. If any personality you could imagine as like a mountain top personality, we're talking about what happened to Jesus on the mountaintop. Just that mountaintop moment is that incredible moment of glory, of power.

Muhammad Ali had that personality. And yet when it came time to make a stand on principle and to make a sacrifice, a real sacrifice in his career and in his freedom, he was absolutely ready to step down from the mountaintop of fame, to step down from the mountaintop of safety and to put himself in harm's way. When we hear our scripture reading this morning about Jesus going up to the mountaintop, it's really easy to think that this is just a piece of scripture about going up to the top of the mountain. Oh, but it's not. It's not. It's really easy to think this is just about what happened up there on the mountain, but it's not. It's about that need, the absolute need to come back down the mountain.

What happened to the disciples up there? They got up there, they were looking around. Here's Moses. Here's Elijah. Jesus, you've got the glory of God shining out of your body. This is all that we need. Peter says, "Hey, let me build a couple of little huts up here. We'll build a couple of little huts up here. We never have to leave. Let's stay here forever." And what does Jesus say? Suddenly God's voice disappears. Suddenly the lights go away. Suddenly the ghosts of Moses and Elijah, they disappear. They're just standing there. And Jesus says, "No, it's time to go back down from the mountain." Back down. Back down.

If we're going to follow Jesus, we have to follow Jesus back down the mountain. And if we're going to follow Jesus, we have to understand Jesus' perspective. What did he say to the disciples on the way down the mountain? Don't even tell anybody what happened down there. It was just the four of us. It stays between us until after everything is accomplished. And what was it that Jesus was going down to accomplish? It was the work of Lent, it was the journey to Jerusalem, it was the journey to the cross, a journey, not of glory, but of blood, and sacrifice, and pain and service. He said, "Follow me. Don't even think about what happened up there anymore. Follow me. We have somewhere to go." This piece of scripture is not about the mountaintop. It's about what happens after the mountaintop. It's about that decision to come down.

Muhammad Ali was somebody who knew that there was no separation between that mountaintop personality and the personality of the one who goes down and sacrifices and serves. Let me give you another example. There's a man from Kenya. His name is Charles Mulli. I don't know if any of you have ever heard of him, but we should have heard of him because there are few people in the world who have done more good than Charles Mulli. Charles Mulli was born in Kenya. At six years old, he was completely abandoned by his parents. He lived as a child on the streets begging for the ability to survive. And at 17 years old, without family, without support of any kind, he walked into a church. He had a mountaintop experience. The power of God came into him. It was that classic born again, salvation story. That wonderful story that we love in the Christian tradition. He was saved, but that wasn't the end of his story.

He went on from there and he became a businessman and he became one of the richest men in Kenya, a multimillionaire with all kinds of different diversified businesses. And yet, and some people would look at that and say, well, that's because he saved. And this is God's favor coming down on Charles Mulli, but that wasn't enough for Charles Mulli. Charles Mulli said here I am on the mountaintop. It's not enough because every day he would walk through the streets of his city and he would see abandoned, orphaned, poverty stricken children, begging for the ability to eat, just like he was when he was a child, and salvation for him, the mountaintop for him, it was not enough.

And so in 1999, Charles Mulli and Esther Mulli, his wife, sold all of their property and all of their businesses and used the proceeds to establish the Mulli Children's Family, an organization that would create orphanages and programs to support the children who are living on the street, abandon in poverty. And since 1999, when they started this program, they have housed and raised more than 23,000 children. They have been recognized around the world as incredible humanitarians, as people who refused to sit on top of the mountain, people who had to come down. Sometimes we think of Christianity that the whole point of us being here, the whole point is to get to the mountaintop. We want to get to salvation. Let's get to salvation. Let's have that moment like Charles Mulli had in that church where the power of God comes into us, we give our heart over to Jesus, we lay our lives bare, we find that forgiveness, we're in good relationship with God and we are destined for Heaven and forget the rest of the world. What does it matter?

But that's where we make a mistake. We think that mountaintop, that salvation moment is the most important moment, but it isn't. It is the most important moment until you have gotten to the top of the mountain. But once you are on that mountaintop, once you know God, and you have laid your soul bare to God, and you have been blessed by God. At some point, you've got to come back down that mountain just like Jesus did, to serve. And that's what Charles Mulli did. He was saved at 17. He could have just kicked his feet up and waited to die, but that's not what a Christian does. A Christian is one who has been to the mountaintop and refused to dwell there. Just like Jesus did, just like the disciples did. You come back down to that convulsing child and you heal in the riot and the chaos of this world. That is our calling.

I think of a great example of this is one of my favorite people, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a German Christian pastor who was living in New York City at the time of the events of World War II and the rise of the Nazis in Germany. And everybody said to Dietrich, "Dietrich, you're one of the most brilliant German Protestant theologians to ever come. You're one of the most brilliant theologians in the world.

We need you here, safe in New York City to speak out against the Nazis. Speak out against the Nazis from here, where you're safe." On the mountaintop of safety. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "No, I'm going home and I'm going to fight. I'm going to put everything at risk. How could a Christian stay in safety when their homeland is at threat and their family is at threat?" So he went back to Germany and when he was there in Germany, he resisted the Nazis as best he could. And it eventually came to a point where Dietrich Bonhoeffer got involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

And Bonhoeffer was an extraordinarily moral, incredible theologian. He understood and he wrestled with the fact that he believed that his salvation would be at risk. He may lose his salvation. Why? Because he was openly plotting to murder someone. And he knew that wasn't right. And yet, as a Christian, as one who was following Christ, he could no longer see a path to avoid it. As one who followed Christ and one who loved God's children, he could see no other path, but to participate in an activity that may rob him of his salvation. And he did it because he understood what it meant to come down the mountain. He understood what salvation meant. He understood that grace and that love. Coming down the mountain.

If you Google the name Kendrick Castillo, I don't know if that name is familiar to you, but you will see a teenage kid, Latino kid, Hispanic American kid. Oh man. The smile on this kid. He's just got a face that draws you in, shining with the glory of God. Kendrick was raised by his parents as a Catholic. He was a good Catholic boy. He deeply identified with his religion and he was involved with the Knight of Columbus. And I think before he was like 17 years old, he had already logged thousands upon thousands of hours of service to people less fortunate than him through Catholic charities and activities. Just the kind of person he was. Somebody loved by his friends, a kid who was on the mountaintop, the precipice of an outstanding future.

And then in 2019, a gunman walked into his classroom at his STEM high school in Colorado and Kendrick who was standing on top of that mountain, had a decision to make. What am I going to do? And he threw himself at that gunman. And one of the reasons you haven't heard about that shooting is because Kendrick was the only one who lost his life. When that shooter intent on killing a lot of people, came into his classroom. How does a 17 year old high school kid make a decision like that to come down the mountain so fast? I believe that he had practiced in little ways. It doesn't always have to be the big sacrifice, the little ways. He had served. He had volunteered. He had given of himself. He understood how to come down the mountain. And when that big moment came, that grand moment came and he had a choice to sacrifice everything for the people he loved tragically and heroically, he was able to make that choice.

Are we practicing to come down the mountain? Are we taking the risks of service to the world that God loves? Or are we clinging to the mountaintop? If you're anything like me, it's a little bit of both, but Jesus is leading us down the mountain. I'd like to just talk to you about one more thing this morning, which is about this little mountaintop right here. The pulpit. There is a way in which I have been very cautious in my preaching with all of you. I have stood at that pulpit most often. And I have had something called a manuscript that I have preached from, I read it. And isn't that a safety device? Oh, yes, it is.

Because when I do that, nothing that you do in this sanctuary has any effect on me. I'm just reading from the paper and oh, it gives me comfort to have those perfectly crafted sentences, that perfectly crafted rhetoric. Rhetoric that Muhammad Ali would've blown his nose on because that guy was a genius. Have you heard some of the things that he said? But pretty good for a minister. But one of the commitments that I'm making this Lent is to come down from the mountaintop and to throw the notes away and to just come into as close as I can to you, and to look you in the eyes and to speak directly to you and to allow what is happening in this room to affect the way I preach and to allow your concerns and your emotions, and even your facial expressions of what I could see of them, to affect the way that I'm going to preach. And this is an invitation to all of you. There's other ways that I'm doing this too. I want to make myself available. I want to come down the mountain as much as I can.

I've been holding office hours. Linda and John came to my first office hours. So did Bonnie. Linda, we had a great conversation, didn't we? It was an amazing conversation. And it was a down from the mountaintop conversation. Eye to eye, heart to heart. We didn't agree on everything, but man, did we make progress? It was just a beautiful natural conversation. And I just love being in that kind of relationship with the community. Bonnie and I are also holding a 15-person limit Friday potluck at our house once a month on the first Friday, the first one is happening on March 4th. And you can sign up to come to that. We want to bring community back together. And the other way I'm going to do it is by coming right down here and talking to you without the notes and looking you in the eye. And there are going to be points in the Lent where I allow you to speak back to me so that you really have a chance to interact and that we can really come together as a community and let magic happen in this space again.

Let us pray. God of the mountaintop, God of Lent. Oh, the glory of your shining. Oh, the glory of your service. Lead us up. Do not let us linger. Lead us down into this world. Lead us down into this church. Lead us down into the love of our neighbors. Amen.