

Travel into the heights with your Savior and Friend! Visit mountaintops that mark progress of his earthly journey among us! Review the old, old story of Jesus and his limitless love for you! Refresh yourself in an urgency to carry out his Great Commission. Prepare for a life of real mountain-moving adventures as, day by day, you cling tightly to his powerful promises!

MOUNTAINTOP JOURNEYS WITH JESUS

A Bible Study by Robert F. Selle

What a joy to travel up, up, up into high mountains to rejoice in the rugged beauty of God's incredible creation, or to stand in awe gazing up at a cloud-piercing range of "purple mountain majesty". Maybe you've viewed entire Appalachian hillsides clothed in blooming rhododendron, or smelled sweet pine-needle perfume wafting from sun-baked mountain slopes. Maybe you've stood speechless before a sunrise over Mount Hood, or marveled at the faces of presidents etched in stone, or tumbled head-over heels down a ski slope, or hiked high trails etched in wildflowers, or captured wilderness creatures with your camera. Just because we're from the Midwest doesn't mean that we don't appreciate mountains!

Even more, we People of the Book have a deep appreciation for mountains because of earth-shaking events that took place on the rocky terrain of the ancient Near East—events that not only formed the foundation of Judeo-Christian tradition, but, still today, give inspired substance to the saving faith that fills every believer's heart with peace and hope, both in this life and for the life to come.

As you might expect from a book written by the inhabitants of a mountainous country, mountains range all across the biblical narrative.¹

- The first rainbow arched over Mount **ARARAT** with a special promise for survivors of the Flood.
- Out of a burning bush on Mount **HOREB**, the great "I AM" revealed his divine name to Moses.
- Almighty God descended on Mount **SINAI** in fire, with thunder & lightning, to forge a permanent covenant with Israel: "*I will be your God,*" he proclaimed, "*and you will be my obedient people.*"
- On top of Mount **TABOR**, Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth, recognized by his faith-full followers as true Messiah, was transfigured in glory, in fulfillment of the Law and Prophets.
- At a hill outside Jerusalem called **GOLGATHA**, this same Jesus was lifted on a cross and hung halfway between heaven & earth to effect reconciliation of sinful humanity and the holy God.
- Then, risen from the dead, Jesus ascended from the heights of Mount **OLIVES**, where an angel announced: "*This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.*" (Acts 1:11)

Is it any wonder that even the mountains themselves have reason to rejoice at the greatness of God?

- **"Burst into song, you mountains, ...for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel."** (Isaiah 44:23)
- **"Burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones."** (Isaiah 49:13)
- **"Let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord... He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity."** (Psalm 98:8-9)

¹ A concordance lists over 550 uses of the word "mountain", and another 120 references to the word "hill". Fully 35 mountains are identified by name, from Abarim & Aarat to Zemaraim & Zion. The last page of this Bible study is a little exercise called "Mountains of the Bible". It's a review of some mountains mentioned in Scripture, with momentous events that happened on their heights. Don't be frightened off by the "fill-in-the-blank" format, since the Bible references can help you do the match-ups. We won't take time to go through it in our study sessions. Some fun "homework" for your free time.

The aim of this Bible study is to take mountaintop journeys with Jesus—to visit some of the mountains that marked his earthly sojourn among us and, throughout our travel, to remember and celebrate his unconditional love for us. When you ascend to such heights, the view is fantastic! We can see a long, long way! With such an expansive overview, it's easier to put things into the proper perspective. We sometimes get so caught up in the busyness of this work-a-day world that, as the expression goes, "we can't see the forest for the trees". We have trouble setting priorities. We put first things last, and last things first. We forget our Savior. We lose hold of his hand and get lost in the wastelands. Sometimes it's so necessary just to stand back and "get you up into a high mountain".

Our Lord sets a good example for us. Jesus often went off by himself to make a mountaintop trip.

+ **Matthew 14:23**—*"He went up into the hills by himself to pray."*

+ **Mark 1:35**—*"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."*

+ **Luke 5:16**—*"Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."*

+ **Luke 6:12**—*"One of those days Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night praying to God."*

Why was this mountaintop time so vital, so necessary, for him? So Jesus could talk to God, renew the intimacy of their loving relationship, refresh his strength for ministry, and center his mind & heart on the single-minded purpose and direction of his earthly journey. (Isn't it that way for us too?) Even at life's most critical juncture, as he anticipated arrest, torture and execution, it was the same; he went off with a group of friends to a quiet mountain garden, and earnestly sought God's direction there: *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done."* (Luke 22:42)

Actually, our mountaintop experiences may have no connection whatsoever with the material world of mountain peaks. Instead, they will typically be disembodied ascents to spiritual heights, to heights of the soul, where consciousness is lifted up, as if on eagle's wings, into the very presence of God.

Author of Landscape and Memory, Simon Schama, notes: *"There at the windswept top of the world, with all creation spread out before you, you stand in awe. 'How great thou art!' you exclaim. A curious transformation begins. Instead of seeing yourself at the center of the universe, you begin to realize how small you are, how tiny in the scope of things, yet how amazing this grace of God that deigns to gather you to himself, to cradle you in his bosom, to call you by name and say, 'You are mine!'"*

At various points in our mountaintop journeys with Jesus, we will have opportunity to share with each other some of our mountaintop memories, some of the joys that we've experienced in the heights.

To begin this sharing...**describe an experience from your spiritual journey that gave you great joy:**

Recently, someone asked me, "What's the most memorable experience of your years in the Philippines?" A scene formed in my mind's eye: the little dirt-floored bamboo chapel in Talisay, on the north coast of Mindanao. It's Sunday morning. The place is packed, not just with member families, but with evacuees of the bloody warfare between guerillas and government soldiers raging in the mountains round-about. Thousands have been displaced from their homes and are fleeing for their lives. Some of these homeless ones are here today; most, we know, we'll never see again. Today, in the middle of our worship time, a refugee raises his hand to speak. He stands, and, in a loud, clear, urgent voice, asks: "**Sirs, unsa-on man makabuhat ko aron maluwas?**" Literally translated, his question is this: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Oh, precious Lord! A shiver ran up and down my spine! His words were drawn straight from the book of Acts: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) With a rare sense of privilege, we gathered around him and gladly shared the Good News: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!"

MOUNTAINTOP OF REVELATION

First stop in our mountaintop journeys with Jesus is a grassy rangeland in the rugged foothills of the Judean Mountains, near a little town called “Bethlehem”, where shepherds watch their flocks by night...

READ LUKE 2:8-20

No Christmas pageant would be complete without a band of bathrobe-clad shepherds, who travel to center stage to see the child lying in a manger. Vivid, even humorous, memories may come to mind...

Vignette from Bonifacio

Why do you think *shepherds* were chosen as *the very first individuals* to receive the most incredible birth announcement of the ages? Share your ideas.

In ancient times, shepherding was considered a noble profession. In fact, it's the very first occupation mentioned in the Bible. Who is named as the first “keeper of the sheep”? _____ (*Genesis 4:2*) During Israel's nomadic years, it was still seen as a worthy career (i.e., Abraham, Issac, Jacob, Jethro), since it produced basic necessities for life: food, shelter, clothing. In David's day, it regained brief popularity—the shepherd-king pointed to God with rejoicing: “*The Lord is my shepherd...*” (*Psalms 23:1*)

That positive attitude didn't last. Maybe the negativity of their neighbors to the south finally rubbed off. *Genesis 46:36* says, “*All shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians*”. Being a shepherd could even be seen as *punishment!* *Numbers 14:33* notes: “*And your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they shall suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness.*”

For sure, during *Jesus'* time, shepherds were viewed as unsavory persons—untrustworthy and unclean. Rabbis reported that “most of the time [the shepherds] are dishonest and thieving; they lead their herds onto other people's property and pilfer the produce of the land.” Pious people were therefore warned not to buy wool, milk or kids from shepherds—on the assumption that this was stolen property. The Mishnah even said that no one should feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who had fallen into a pit.

It got so bad that shepherds were even deprived of basic civil rights. Their testimony was inadmissible in a Jewish court. Because they couldn't observe ceremonial regulations like ritual hand-washings and the like, they were even unwelcome guests at the temple. Imagine! They couldn't even go to church! Shepherds were at the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder, lumped together with tax collectors, dung sweepers, and prostitutes, officially labeled as “sinners”.

It's to people like this that Luke's Gospel refers. The evangelist tells of shepherds working the night shift, watching their flocks in Judea's hill country. A map shows the little town of Bethlehem in foothills of a rugged mountain range running north-south down the spine of Palestine. At an elevation of 2,543 feet, Bethlehem overlooks Jerusalem, just 5 miles to the south. Being so close to the Holy City, some commentators suggest that animals from Bethlehem may have been reserved for temple sacrifices, to be offered up for the forgiveness of sins. Wouldn't it be exciting for God to issue such shepherds an invitation to meet the newborn Lamb of God who would *forever* take away the sins of the world?

So it was, very suddenly, in the dark of night, an angel appeared in shining glory—not vague or distant, but upfront and personal. The shepherds were completely encompassed by light! Talk about a real mountaintop experience! Sin's darkness encountered the glory of God—his “*shekinah*”. People who couldn't go to church had “church” brought to them, with a heavenly host serving as choir. And what do you think their reaction was? Literally in Greek, “*they feared a great fear*”. But the angel said, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*” (v. 10)

To truly appreciate “good news”, one must first understand the “bad news”. What’s the bad news?

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:10-20, 23)

The good news that was delivered by the angel is summarized with *three brief titles* given to “the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”. (See Luke 2:11) Discuss the significance of each of these titles:

SAVIOR _____

CHRIST _____

LORD _____

Would these nameless shepherds have willingly gone to visit Jesus if he’d been born in a grand palace, in pomp and pageantry, surrounded by nobles and priests? They’d have been turned away at the door! So where might they feel most comfortable? A stable! They knew all about stables. They felt at home there. The Good Shepherd didn’t expect shepherds to leave their comfort zone to approach him in a majestic heavenly throne-room. Instead, God came down to find his children where they were at—in the darkness, in their workplaces, in the menial, even unsavory circumstances of their daily lifestyles.

What does that say about the nature of God that he chose *a stable* as the site where he’d reveal his earthly arrival to humble shepherds? What does it say about where he seeks you out—in whatever humble or horrible circumstances you might be—to reveal himself and his amazing grace to you?

When the host of angels finished praising God, what were the two active responses of the shepherds?

Luke 2:16 _____

Luke 2:17 _____

How will these two gospel responses be shown in your life and behavior? In what concrete ways?

1. _____

2. _____

Most striking in this narrative from St. Luke is the disclosure that it was not shepherds who discovered their Savior, but it was a loving God who revealed their Savior to them. In the same way, it’s not we who discover our gracious God. It is a gracious, sinner-seeking God who comes to us and reveals himself to us. That’s the heart of the Gospel!

➤ **Luke 19:10** “Jesus said...,”*The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*”

- **John 3:17** *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*
- **1 Timothy 1:15** *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”*

God revealed himself to certain shepherds, watching over their flocks at night, with the brightly-shining testimony of a host of angels, and they hastened off to find the long-awaited Messiah lying in a manger.

Where and how did God first reveal his presence and power to you? Who first introduced Jesus and his love? Was it in the loving witness and example of a parent? At a church service? Through the testimony of a friend? In a Bible class?

Share details of the mountaintop experience where you first learned about and experienced his glory:

MOUNTAINTOP OF INSPIRATION

Our second mountaintop journey with Jesus takes us to the temple mount in Jerusalem. Religious scholars who gathered in the temple courts that day to dialogue with their peers would have had no inkling that they'd have a mountaintop experience in the presence of a 12 year old boy from Nazareth. Scripture describes the scene. Jesus sat with a group of Jewish rabbis “listening to them and asking them questions”. We're told it was an amazing experience for those who were there.

Read Luke 2:41-52

Wouldn't it have been exciting to listen in? To eavesdrop? The Bible doesn't give a verbatim of what transpired, or share snippets of the conversation. However, since the teachings of Jesus were “words of eternal life”, a harmony of message, woven of one and the same cloth, and proclaimed seamlessly throughout his earthly ministry, we can get an idea of some possible themes by reading either Jesus' “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7) or his “Sermon on the Plain” (Luke 6:17-49).

Scripture clearly testifies to the unique nature of Jesus' words. Identify each characteristic trait:

_____ [Jesus said,] *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* (Mark 13:31)

_____ *“All spoke well of [Jesus] and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”* (Luke 4:22)

_____ *“They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.”* (Luke 4:32)

_____ [Jesus said,] *“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”* (John 6:63)

_____ *“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’* (John 6:68)

_____ *“No one ever spoke the way this man does,’ the guards declared.”* (John 7:46)

_____ [Jesus said,] *“He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”* (John 14:24)

The Bible also points to powerful and unshakable promises that are given to all who keep his word:

- **John 8:51**.....[Jesus said,] *“I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death.”*

- **John 14:23.....** *“Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.’”*
- **Revelation 3:8...** *“See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”*

To have a mountaintop experience in dialogue with God’s holy Word can be truly exhilarating and inspirational. And why wouldn’t it be when we consider some of the incredible attributes of God’s Word:

- + **It is _____.** *“Your word is truth.”* (John 17:17)
- + **It is without _____.** *“The word of the Lord is flawless.”* (2 Samuel 22:31)
- + **It’s _____ for our survival.** *“Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”* (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- + **It can create _____.** *“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* (Romans 10:17)
- + **It is _____.** *“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* (Hebrews 4:12)
- + **It _____ our path in life.** *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”* (Psalm 119:105)
- + **It produces _____.** *“As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* (Isaiah 55:10-11)
- + **It is fully manifested in _____.** *“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

Shortly we will have opportunity to share with one another a mountaintop experience we have had as we meditated on a verse or theme of the Bible, one that opened a whole new dimension for our heart, or lifted us to a higher level of understanding, or gave fresh insight for our spiritual journey. First, however, listen to two examples. Here’s one from the life of Dr. Martin Luther:

An excerpt from Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Works (1545) by Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546, translated by Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB, from the “Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe, 1545” in volume 4 of “Luther’s Werke in Auswahl”, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter. 1967). Pp 421-428 See <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1519luther-tower.asp>

“In that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul’s Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it.’ I hated that word, “justice of God”, which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

“But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn’t be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, ‘Isn’t it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with

his justice and his wrath?’ This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

“I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.” I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e., that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’ All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

“I exalted this sweetest word of mine, ‘the justice of God,’ with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.”

Now for an example closer to home... I, too, had a difficult section of Scripture opened up for me when I placed it into the context of a Near Eastern custom that’s very different from our American way of life. For a long time, I’d wondered about the opening verses of Isaiah 55. It was confusing to me:

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.” (Isaiah 55:1-3)

I hadn’t the foggiest idea what the inspired author was talking about, even though he was obviously talking about the full and free salvation we enjoy because of God’s grace. But where can you buy wine and milk without money and without cost? It didn’t make any sense.

Some years ago, however, I visited India, the birthplace of my wife. I was surprised to see water vendors pushing carts through the streets, hawking their water at several small coins per glass. It was the same with milk or vegetables. For a price, all these goods were for sale. Once in a while, however, on special occasions, there’d be days when a particular vendor would push his cart through the streets, crying: “Get your water for free!” or “Come, buy milk at no cost!” So what’s going on?

We know that here in America, when it’s your birthday, people give gifts to you. You’re a recipient of all sorts of goodies because it’s the way family and friends express their happiness that you’re celebrating another year of life. However, in nations of the Near East, the custom is quite different. On someone’s birthday, the *one who’s having the birthday* gives gifts to others to celebrate the anniversary of his birth. But he doesn’t want to do it in a way that would create feelings of obligation to himself, so he approaches a water vendor, for instance, and gives him a sum of money: “Go through the streets today and give your water away for free, since I’m paying for it all now.” When the vendor shouted, “Come, buy water at no cost,” everyone knew that someone had already paid for it. Just like God’s salvation is given to us not because it’s of no value, but because it’s already paid for. It cost Jesus his life’s blood to earn our redemption! But now he gives eternal life to us for “free”, simply because he has already paid the full price on our behalf.

Now those verses jump out at me with all the joy that God’s amazing grace brings into my life!

SO NOW IT’S YOUR TURN! Can you think of a verse or Bible story that came alive for you and inspired you? Maybe it happened through the instruction of a Bible teacher, or through your private study and meditation, or perhaps in a memorable sermon. Share your “mountaintop of inspiration” with a friend...

MOUNTAIN TOP OF VICTORY OVER TEMPTATION

The third in our mountaintop journeys with Jesus leads us up “a very high mountain”. We don’t know the name of this mountain or where it was, but we do know that Jesus had company. He was not alone. Satan was there with great craftiness and evil fury, obsessed with the aim to destroy Jesus’ mission,

Read Matthew 4:8-11

Obviously, no mountain in Israel would be high enough to view all the kingdoms on earth—but Satan somehow managed to conjure up this fiendish vision for Jesus. The devil claimed to have been given authority over all these earthly kingdoms and says: “*I can give it to anyone I want.*” (Luke 4:6) Well, we know, and it’s clear to anyone with eyes to see, that secular society is the domain of Satan. The fallen world is totally in his clutches. He has this worldly world right where he wants it—in his evil embrace. Nor did Jesus argue with Satan, or dispute his misguided boast, even though Scripture is very clear that God is sovereign, and all authority in heaven and earth belongs to him. Jesus said, “*All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me.*” (Matthew 28:18) St. Paul stated: “*There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*” (Romans 13:1)

Jesus knew, as we should, that the devil has been a liar from the beginning. Satan is the prince of liars. John the Evangelist records words of Jesus: “*There is no truth in [the devil]. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*” (8:44)

In addition, the only thing Satan ostensibly could offer were “*kingdoms*” (plural)—a host of warring, fractious, divided, and contentious nations. In contrast, Jesus spoke often about the coming of a singular “*Kingdom*”—one that would be marked by harmony and peace and joy. As soon as he began his public ministry, Jesus began to preach, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.*” (Matthew 4:17)

Later, Jesus went into more detail: “*The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.*” (Luke 17:20-21) “*I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” (John 3:5) Standing before Pilate, Jesus proclaimed, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place... For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*” (John 18:36-37)

Daniel had prophesied about this kingdom: “*The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.*” (2:44)

St. Paul elaborated for his friends: “*The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” (Romans 14:17) “*The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*” (1 Corinthians 4:20)

So who did Satan think he was, and with what treasure did he think to tempt Jesus when he offered authority over all worldly kingdoms? In the first place, Jesus already possessed that authority. Second, the Kingdom of Heaven was the true prize, the pearl of great price.

Satan simply wanted Jesus to act in disobedience to the will of God. He wanted him to behave like the first Adam, who flouted God’s will and took a mouthful of fruit. The second Adam—Jesus—knew that no matter how small or seemingly insignificant it is, God expects total faithfulness. Whenever people choose to do what they want, no matter how small or “trivial”—if it’s against the will of God, it can bring nothing but death. We maybe think God will wink at “little things” and only hold us accountable for “big things”. No, God expects complete faithfulness to all his commands!

A classic example of this is Moses. In an episode that happened during Israel's wilderness wanderings, the disobedience of their leader caused him to be barred entry into the Promised Land. When you read the account from Numbers 20, it seems at first like such a little thing:

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.' So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.' These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them." (Numbers 20:8-13)

Notice how Moses hit the rock, instead of just *speaking* to it as God had commanded. Surely the Lord wanted people to see and celebrate *his* power, not watch the self-indulgent temper tantrum of Moses.

And what about our "little" sins? Does God hold us guiltless for those, any more than he did Moses? Isn't all our sin a deadly serious affair? And isn't it therefore vital that we resist every temptation to sin?

But HOW? How can we resist and repel every wicked wile of the Evil One?

Jesus sets an awesome example for us. His holy Word also describes **three weapons** God provides to help us fight daily temptations we encounter, and resist the devil so he will flee from us. (See James 4:7)

1. **First Weapon:** _____

- + In his rebuke of Satan, Jesus quoted from Scripture, from the book of Deuteronomy: *"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"* (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13)
- + *"Take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."* (Ephesians 6:17)

2. **Second Weapon:** _____

- + *"In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."* (Ephesians 6:16)
- + *"Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'"* (John 6:28-29)
- + Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."* (Matthew 17:20)
- + *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith."* (1 Peter 5:8-9)

3. **Third Weapon:** _____

- + [Jesus said,] *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."* (Matthew 26:41)
- + *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."* (Matthew 7:7)
- + *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."* (Romans 8:26)

SMALL GROUP SHARING

(Choose one of the following topics to discuss)

1. When has your use of God's Word and prayer in a personal situation been the means of a victory over temptation—for you or for someone else?
2. Take time to share with friends a mountaintop experience when God granted you sweet victory at a time you were sorely tempted. Let this be an encouragement to members of your group. May it be for you like it was for St. Paul, who wrote to his far-away friends in Thessalonica:

“When I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.”

(1 Thessalonians 3:5-7)

3. Talk about the following two passages from the book of Hebrews, and consider how these truths can help God's people during their times of temptation:

Hebrews 2:14-15, 17-18

“Since the children have flesh and blood, [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death... For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Hebrews 4:14b-16

“Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

MOUNTAINTOP OF TRANSCENDENCE

Our next journey with Jesus takes us high up onto the Mount of Transfiguration. Here Moses & Elijah spoke with Jesus “about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:31) Witnesses to this glowing manifestation of Jesus' glory were three disciples: Peter, John, & James. They never forgot this remarkable experience. It changed their lives. Years later, St. Peter wrote his friends and said: “*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*” (2 Peter 1:16-19)

Read Matthew 17:1-8

On the mountain, three disciples were eyewitnesses of Jesus' glory, which lighted him with bold, bright, shining-white beauty. They heard the voice of the Father boom from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." (v 5) For them, it was a dramatic confirmation of Jesus' deity. Scripture exclaims: "*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.*" (Colossians 1:19) In this mountaintop epiphany, Jesus was affirmed as "*Immanuel*"—which means "God with us". (Matthew 1:23)

Now Jesus is pleased to dwell in his redeemed people, who are temples of the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19) We rejoice with St. Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) Now, by grace, by God's mighty power, we, too, can experience a transfiguration of sorts. Paul uses this exact-same Greek word when writing to his friends in Corinth: "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being *transformed* [e.g., *transfigured*] into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

It's a thrilling thing when, in a singular moment, we are blessed with such a transformative experience, something that changes us, dramatically and wonderfully. Such experiences serve to strengthen our faith and ground us even more solidly on Christ, the Rock. Suddenly, in these special occasions, we see with new perspective. For a brief moment, the cloud is pulled aside and we glimpse the awesome majesty of God—like Isaiah in his heavenly vision. (See Isaiah 6:1-8) At such times, our Lord seems so close and so real that we can literally *feel* the tender arms of Jesus embracing us to his heart.

Sometimes the catalyst that God uses to effect this transformation is very small. Sometimes it's very large. God can use everything and anything for his holy purposes.

Listen first to a vignette drawn from The Hiding Place by Corrie ten Boon, as reported by Andree Seu in World Magazine (April 23, 2011, p. 83)

During World War II, in a concentration camp called Ravensbruck, Corrie & Betsie ten Boon had just discovered that their new barracks was infested with fleas:

"Betsie, how can we live in such a place!"

"Show us. Show us how." It was said so matter of factly it took me a second to realize she was praying. More and more the distinction between prayer and the rest of life seemed to be vanishing for Betsie.

Corrie remembered the Bible passage they had read that morning. They looked both ways, then read, "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus."

"That's it, Corrie! That's His answer. 'Give thanks in all circumstances!'... We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks." They commenced praise for their being assigned to the same barracks; for the Bible they got away with keeping; for the other women who would meet Jesus through that Bible.

"Thank you," Betsie went on serenely, "for the fleas."

Here Corrie raised an objection. But some time later, the residents of Barracks 28 noted a puzzling phenomenon, that the guards who were so zealous in surveillance of the Lagerstrasse and the center room exerted almost no supervision of their particular dormitory. When a dispute over socks did not prompt official intervention, they learned that the supervisor refused to set foot in the place. She was heard to say: "That place is crawling with fleas!"

Such a little thing—fleas! Yet in God’s providence, they were used for God’s glory, to help his children realize how God works in all things for their good (see Romans 8:28), how he can further the Holy Spirit’s transformation of his people, by his amazing power, more and more into Jesus’ likeness!

For an even more dramatic transformation, we turn to a newsletter from Dave & Rachel Baker, LCMS missionaries in Kazakhstan. They tell about the transformation of a little Muslim boy named “Daniar”:

“Daniar’s life changed forever when he climbed into an unlocked electrical main box during a game of hide-and-seek. He was electrocuted for almost 40 minutes before someone finally pulled him out using a wooden stick. There is a hole in his chest and a part of his skull missing where the electricity shot out of his little body. His right arm was burned so badly that it had to be completely amputated.

Daniar lay in a coma for days. The doctors were sure he would die, but God had other plans. Daniar awoke suddenly and asked his mom, “Where is the man who helped me?” (No one took note of his question in all the excitement—they were just ecstatic he was alive!) Later he explained how in his dreams, a long-haired man surrounded by bright light and dressed in a white robe had reached out his hand and told him to get up.

While awaiting his first round of surgeries (sponsored by Faith Lutheran Church in Troy, MI), Daniar was watching a video of Bible stories at the mission house in Almaty. Suddenly he jumped up, pointing excitedly at the image of Jesus on TV, and yelled out, “That is the man who helped me!”

Through unspeakable tragedy, salvation has come to this family! Now they know their Savior—Jesus—who heals body and soul.”

(From the February 2011 “Baker Bulletin”)

Small Group Sharing

Now it’s *your turn* to take a moment and share with friends a “transfiguration” that you’ve experienced in your own life—maybe during a time of trouble or turmoil or illness when God’s loving face shined bright and bold into your life. Maybe God even accomplished a miracle for you, or a member of your family...

MOUNTAINTOP OF RECONCILIATION

People of the North Wisconsin District don’t have many bragging rights when it comes to mountains. New London has Mosquito Hill. The UP has its Iron Mountain. Wausau has Rib Mountain—but even this, at its topmost, is only 1,940 feet above sea level. The highest site in the state is more modestly titled a hill... Timm’s Hill in Price County is exactly 11½ feet higher than Rib Mountain, topping out at 1,951.5 feet. Compare that with Africa’s highest mountain, Kilimanjaro, which measures in at 19,340’. Or most famous of all, Mount Everest, at 29,032’. Even some biblical mountains tower over our state champions. Mount Sinai rises to 7,500 feet, and Mount Hermon to 9,230’.

In my opinion, however, the highest mountain in all creation, towering head & shoulders above all others, is just 30 feet high! Called “Skull Hill” by the locals, Christians still sing about this “green hill far away outside a city wall where our dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.” (Joyful Sounds, CPH 1977, #38, v. 1)

In the Aramaic tongue, it's called "Golgotha", but in his English Bible, St. Jerome translated this word as "Calvary", and that's the term which is used in a hymn beloved throughout Christendom:

***Come to Calv'ry's holy mountain,
Sinners, ruined by the fall;
Here a pure and healing fountain
Flows for you, for me, for all,
In a full perpetual tide,
Opened when our Savior died.***

***Take the life that lasts forever;
Trust this soul-renewing flood.
God is faithful; God will never
Break his covenant of blood,
Signed when our Redeemer died,
Sealed when he was glorified.***

(Lutheran Worship, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, c. 1982, Hymn #96, vs. 1, 4)

Read Mark 15:22-26

Gruesome details of Jesus' cruel crucifixion are omitted by the evangelists. In the simplest of terms, Scripture records the manner by which Jesus died. St. Mark uses just two words: ***staurousin auton*** ["they crucified him"]. The central focus of the Gospel accounts is instead on Jesus' humiliation (his nakedness, the mocking crowds, on a sign nailed to the cross, on two criminals executed on either side), on the fulfillment of prophecy (Psalm 22:1, 7, 8, 18; 69:21), on his seven short sentences during the six hours of suffering, and on the abject agony of his separation from God (e.g., the darkness, the cry of despair). It names the first two confessors—a condemned criminal and a Gentile centurion. (Luke 23:41-42; John 19:47) But the horrible suffering that Jesus experienced is not elaborated upon. It's simply assumed.

Secular writers testify to the historicity of this event. Roman historian, **Tacitus**, in his Annals (c AD 116), mentioned that "Christus...suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators..." In more detail, **Josephus**, a first century Jewish historian, wrote:

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."

—Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews – XVIII, 3:8-10

Above our Savior's battered, bleeding head was an inscription, written in 3 languages: Hebrew (i.e., Aramaic), Latin and Greek. On most medieval artwork, usually four letters represent Jesus' regal title: **INRI**. These are the first letters of 4 Latin words: ***lesu Nazarenum Rex Iudeorum***.

INRI Story from Wrightstown

Why was it significant that this title, "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*", was set forth in these three particular languages? Pilate couldn't have realized the deeper dimensions of his act, but, guided by God's sovereignty, the Roman governor was giving concrete witness to the fact that Jesus had come to establish his kingdom throughout the *entire world*! At that time, these three tongues were the media of communication for the whole civilized world—for the Latin-speaking Romans, Aramaic-speaking Jews and Samaritans, and Greek-speaking people of Asia Minor, Greece, and the far-off colonies. Jesus had come to establish a kingly reign over all humanity, of all places and ethnicities. When Jesus died, his blood "*purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*" (Revelation 5:9)

To take a mountaintop journey with Jesus to the heights of Golgotha is to come face to face with an incredible truth: not simply that Jesus died for all people, but *Jesus died for me!* So much he loves *me!*

Why? Why would he do this? Think about the wonderful things that, by grace, now can happen since Jesus died for you. Ponder some verses and summarize their implications for you personally:

- “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” (John 3:16)
- “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” (John 13:1)
- “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8)

+ CONCLUSION: Jesus’ death reveals the incredible _____ of God for me!

- “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3)
- “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” (1 Timothy 1:15)
- “The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)
- [Jesus said,] “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:28)
- “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22)

+ CONCLUSION: Jesus’ death saves me from _____!

- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” (Galatians 3:13)
- “Jesus...was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Hebrews 2:9)
- “‘Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.’” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

+ CONCLUSION: Jesus’ death saves me from _____!

- “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:17-18)
- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (John 3:36)
- “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1)

+ CONCLUSION: Jesus’ death saves me from _____!

- “[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14)
- “Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.’” (John 12:23-24)
- “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16)

+ CONCLUSION: Jesus’ death creates _____.

- “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15)
- “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)
- “...The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

+ CONCLUSION: Faith in Jesus gives _____ to all who believe—to me!

Small Group Sharing

Discuss: When you go to Mount Calvary and behold Jesus lifted up on the cross, bleeding and dying for you, what thoughts come into your mind and heart? What do you feel?

I discovered a beautiful prayer-poem written by Victor Hoagland of the Congregation of the Passion. In this "Prayer before the Cross", he personalizes the seven sentences that Jesus spoke:

***O Jesus, Son of God,
You were born in a stable
and died on the cross
for our salvation.
Say to your heavenly Father
at the hour of my death:
"Father, forgive them."
Say to your loving mother:
"Behold your daughter, behold your son."
Say to my soul:
"This day you shall be with me in Paradise."
"My God, my God, do not abandon me"
in that hour.
"I thirst," my God,
yes, my soul thirsts for you,
the fountain of living waters.
My life passes like a shadow.
Yet a little while and "it is finished."
So, my Savior,
from this moment and for all eternity,
"Into your hands I commend my spirit."
Lord Jesus, receive my soul.
Amen.***

MOUNTAINTOP OF MISSION

After his resurrection, the living Lord delivered to his followers, "on the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (Matthew 28:16), what's often called "*The Great Commission*". It's the great GO-Mission for each and every faithful follower of Jesus:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

On this same mountain, after he had spoken with them one last time, Jesus returned from whence he'd come. He ascended into heaven. Scripture states, "*While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.*" (Luke 24:51) It was both an ending and a wonderful new beginning.

Read Acts 1:7-11

When he ascended to heaven, Jesus didn't really leave his followers. He loved them too much for that. Instead, he *transformed his presence*. No more would he be confined by geography, according to his human nature, but now he could be with all his people, everywhere, at all times, from this time forth and even forevermore! Before, when he was with Simon Peter in Capernaum, he couldn't enjoy the warm companionship of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. As he talked to Nicodemus on a Jerusalem rooftop, he couldn't at the same time be instructing multitudes in the wonders of the Kingdom on a mountaintop in Galilee. Now at last Jesus' confident promise could and would be fulfilled: *"Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20b)

The Bible tells us that Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, "and a cloud hid him from their sight." (Acts 1:9) For us in the 21st century, a cloudy sky only means a chance of rain. However, when St. Luke described Jesus' disappearance into a cloud, he used theological imagery that had clear implications for 1st century disciples, steeped as they were in the ancient history of God's people.

Read these passages aloud:

- **Exodus 13:21** *"By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way."*
- **Exodus 40:34** *"Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle."*
- **2 Chronicles 5:13-14** *"The trumpeters and singers joined in unison as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: 'He is good, his love endures forever.' Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud...for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."*
- **Psalm 68:4** *"Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds—his name is the Lord."*
- **Psalm 104:3** *"[The Lord] makes the clouds his chariot."*

What did a **cloud** signify at these dramatic points in Israel's history? _____

One day, very soon, the glory of the Lord will appear once more in the clouds:

"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'"

(Revelation 1:7-8)

"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

(1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Until then, God's people have an important job to accomplish, a vital **mission mandate**, a command to *"go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."* (Mark 16:15) Scripture commands us to *"declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples."* (Psalm 96:3)

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus indicated to his followers both the **power** for this crucial mission movement, as well as its natural **progression**. It will look like ripples on a pond when a pebble is tossed in the water: Jesus said, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

What's the divine empowerment that God has given to his people? _____

To those of us living in Wisconsin or Michigan's UP, to what might these place-names refer?

- **Jerusalem**....._____
- **Judea**....._____
- **Samaria**....._____
- **Ends of the Earth**..._____

There is so much joy on this mission journey, as God accomplishes his work of redemption through us.

I'll always remember my first trip into virgin rainforests of northern Mindanao—a strenuous 25 kilometer hike over 3 mountain ranges, through a humid twilight-zone of towering lawaan trees. My companions were Evangelist Apolinar Tahoyon and the lay-leader of our lowland Lutheran congregation in Talisay, Daniel Rayon. We hoped to share Good News with residents of a remote Higaon-on village deep in the forest. The old chieftain, a old man with mouth reddened by betel-nut, welcomed us. His son, Datu Mandahinog, invited us into his home—a large bamboo structure that towered on tall stilts. Every night we gathered there to talk about Jesus with the villagers, and share stories from Scripture. Young and old listened intently, sometimes asking questions, but I didn't really know what impact the message was having—until late at night on the third day. A dozen of us stretched out on rattan sleeping mats spread over the split-bamboo floor. I don't know what time it was—sometime in the middle of the night. I was awakened by the quiet whispering of two people who lay next to me: Datu Mandahinog and his wife, Paulina. I knew it was rude, but I couldn't help but overhear their excited conversation:

- > “Before we were always afraid. We tried so hard to follow taboos,” the chieftain said.
- > “We didn't know Jesus then,” Paulina said in a quiet voice.
- > “But now we know Jesus. We know much he loves us! His love caused his suffering, his death.”
“Oh, yes, he loves us very much.”
- > “Now we don't ever need to be afraid.”
- > “We can be happy and not afraid.”
- > “Yes, my happiness is very big today.....”

This joyful conversation went on and on. As I listened, I overflowed with thanksgiving.

As we step out on the special mission adventure that the Lord has designed for each one of us, it's important to remember that God goes with us, and his word is powerful. Consider the verses below, and ask: “What *guidance, instruction* and/or *support* for our mission do these inspired words offer?”

Luke 12:11-12 [Jesus said,] “*When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.*”

Isaiah 55:10-11 “*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*”

Romans 1:16 *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”*

Psalm 66:16 *“Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.”*

Hebrews 13:6 *“So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”*

How blessed are we to have this Gospel to share! And until that Great Day of the Lord, we have Jesus, our Best Friend, walking with us every step of the way on our mission journey through life. Enjoyment of mountain travel is multiplied when you have a companion at your side with whom to share the vistas. Praise God we do not hike the hills and valleys of this life without a Big Brother at our side!

Rev. Teodorico Taran is a pastor of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines. Besides his congregation in Linamon, he serves a mission outstation high in the mountains. It’s a half-hour hike from the end of the road. Each week, Pastor Taran visits this place to lead worship and conduct Bible-teaching, usually in the company of several other members of his city congregation who make the trip with him. One Sunday, however, it was only Pastor Taran. He approached the little bamboo chapel to find a group of people already gathered and waiting. Concern showed in their faces as he approached. It’s dangerous to travel in the mountains alone. There are bandits, steep slopes, rushing rivers, landslides,.. With obvious anxiety, they asked: “Did you come by yourself?” Pastor Taran smiled and said, “No, there were two of us.” The people squinted back down the trail, but saw no one. Their foreheads wrinkled in puzzlement. Pastor Taran added: “You can’t see him, but Jesus walked with me every step of the way.” Slowly, smiles dawned across the faces of the gathered crowd. Yes! This was one of the truths they were beginning to discover from the Bible: our loving God walks with us every single step of life’s way!

With enthusiasm, let’s sing a familiar song of mission-encouragement for all God’s people:

**Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and ev’rywhere;
God tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!**

(Lutheran Service Book, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, c. 2006, Hymn #388)

Sharing Time

Describe a mountaintop experience you’ve had when you shared Good News with someone.

MOUNTAIN TOP OF MYSTERY

In a final mountaintop journey with Jesus, we're invited to "come up here" to see "what must take place after this". (Revelation 4:1) On that last great Day, when Jesus comes again in glory as Judge and King, those who belong to the world will call to the mountains and rocks: "*Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?*" (Revelation 6:16-17) What a striking contrast to the destiny of the righteous! "*There before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*" (Revelation 14:1) "One of the seven angels said to John: "*Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*" And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. *It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*" (Revelation 21:9-11)

Read Micah 4:1-4

Before he left this earth, Jesus promised his disciples that he'd come again. He told his faithful followers he'd go ahead to prepare a place for them, "*and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*" (John 14:3) Since that time, Christians yearn for that great day, eagerly looking forward in holy expectation to the fulfillment of all things, Peter said, "*When the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*" (1 Peter 5:4) John said, "*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*" (1 John 3:2)

Although we don't know *when* this great day will come, we know it will. We don't know all that will take place as the heavens disappear with a roar and elements are destroyed by fire, and God creates a new heaven and earth. (see 2 Peter 3:10-13) All this is beyond human imagination. "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*" (1 Corinthians 2:9) But how awesome it will be to see the great multitude assembled—one "that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9) The psalmist rejoices: "*Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth.*" (Psalm 48:1-2)

Much of what the future holds is mystery. However, one thing we can know is that God's promises are sure. This will take place and soon. "*I am coming soon,*" Jesus promised. (Revelation 3:11; 22:12) If not in my generation, I believe that Jesus' return will surely happen in the lifetime of my children. Take note of the apostle's reminder: "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" (2 Peter 3:9)

What feelings surface in your mind and heart when you think about this coming day of the Lord?

Is it something about which we should be nervous and anxious? Why or why not? (See *Psalm 46:1-2* and *Psalm 121:1-2*)

God bless this little band of mountain-climbers, Lord! May they receive with joy the holy benediction that St. Paul gave his dear friends in Thessalonica: "*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:23) And may we all continually pray together the little prayer with which the Scriptures end: "**Amen, Come, Lord Jesus.**" (Revelation 22:20)

MOUNTAINS OF THE BIBLE

*Fill in each blank with the name of the mountain that matches its description.
Bible references after each one will give a boost on some of the steeper slopes.*

- _____ 1. The mountain where God made his covenant with the Israelites and issued the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone. (**Exodus 19-20**)
- _____ 2. The battleground where King Saul and three of his sons, including Jonathan, lost their lives in a war against the Philistines. (**1 Samuel 31:1-8**)
- _____ 3. The mount where Aaron died and was buried. (**Numbers 20:22-29**)
- _____ 4. Scene of the contest between Elijah & Baal's prophets. (**1 Kings 18:19-40**)
- _____ 5. The place where Jotham spoke his parable to the men of Shechem. (**Judges 9:7-20**)
- _____ 6. The fortified hill which David captured from the Jebusites (**1 Chronicles 11:4-9**), which later took on an apocalyptic significance as "the heavenly Jerusalem". (**Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 14:1**)
- _____ 7. Where Noah's ark came to rest after the Great Flood. (**Genesis 8:4**)
- _____ 8. Barak's base for his successful attack against Sisera (**Judges 4:6-15**), traditionally identified as the Mount of Transfiguration—though not actually named in the gospel accounts (**Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36**)
- _____ 9. The southern limit of Joshua's war of conquest. (**Joshua 11:16-20**)
- _____ 10. The rocky hilltop of Jerusalem where Solomon built the temple. (**2 Chronicles 3:1**)
- _____ 11. The mountain from which Moses viewed the land of Canaan before he died. (**Deuteronomy 32:48-52; 34:1-8**)
- _____ 12. The mount of Jesus' arrest & betrayal (**Luke 22:39-53**), and the site of the ascension. (**Acts 1:6-12**)
- _____ 13. The range of hills where Esau took up residence, where his descendants, the Edomites, lived. (**Genesis 36:8; Joshua 24:4**)
- _____ 14. Location where the Israelites erected large plastered stones, on which were inscribed all the laws of God. (**Deuteronomy 27:1-8**)
- _____ 15. The place where Abimelech found firewood to burn the Tower of Shechem. (**Judges 9:47-49**)
- _____ 16. The dew on this mountain, from which spring the headwaters of the Jordan, is likened to the precious blessing of unity between brothers. (**Psalms 133:3**)

Answers: ARARAT, CARMEL, EBAL, GERIZIM, GILBOA, HALAK, HERMON, HOR, MORIAH, NEBO, OLIVES, SEIR, SINAI, TABOR, ZALMON, ZION