

Lent: The Upward Journey

During the little spiritual retreat I had following my shoulder surgery, I was thoroughly blessed, and I had the sense that I stood on the threshold of a whole other dimension of my experience as a Christian. In fact I had the sense that I stood on the threshold of a whole other dimension period--another and much more desirable world just above and yet reaching into this one. And, for that time I felt that there was nowhere else I would rather be and nothing else I would rather be doing than sitting at the feet of Jesus. There was nothing on Television, nothing on the computer, nothing out in the woodshop or in the garage, nothing at the shopping mall, nothing else anywhere that held a candle to just being in the presence of the Lord. I just had a deep hunger to get closer and closer to Him. It was all very real and refreshing and for a brief time I felt like I could do this full time--just give me a cot in a monastery--or better yet: "Come Lord Jesus and take me home. I just want to be with You."

Probably for the first time in my life, I saw and truly believed that if my connection with Christ were strong enough, I could walk absolutely free from fear, free from striving, free from worrying about the opinions of others, free from self, and free from sin. It was an amazing time, and for a week or more after I returned to a more normal schedule of activities, I felt like I was straddling two worlds: somewhat here but still more there than here. I also had the sensation of being miraculously led by the Holy Spirit. For a number of days in a row it seemed that God made the appointments and I just showed up. Ministry was effortless and quite wonderful.

I totally identify with the apostles, Peter and John, who shared time with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration. They wanted to stay there. Peter said, "Let's put up three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Let's capture and live in this moment forever. I wish I could tell you that I am still there, but I'm not. It's not that I haven't tried. I've lengthened my devotions. I've continued to pray and seek the Lord, but I've felt the glory fading. In some sense it's been like a wonderful dream that you wake up vowing to remember, but as you become fully conscious it floats away despite every effort to call it back.

My conclusion now is that the experience in my retreat was a gift and a certain foretaste of things to come, but not something that I can forcibly hold on to. As Paul says it is given to us to "walk by faith, not by sight." I'm going to have to negotiate dark

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valleys and struggle with dark thoughts and difficult circumstances just like everyone else. Missiles from Satan are going to keep flying at me and I'm going to have to dodge and fight against them. Even though I have a better idea of what's coming, I'm not home yet. I am a bit closer but I'm not there yet.

I share these thoughts with you today as an introduction to the upward journey of our lives and the upward journey of Lent. The inward journey of Lent invites us to discover the presence of God within us. The outward journey of Lent invites us to discover the presence of God in service and evangelism. The upward journey invites and challenges us to meet God through worship, to find our true identity in Him, and to exercise the authority over evil we possess under His Lordship.

The first move upward is found in worship. We were made for worship, just as everything God made is for the praise of His glory. Luke 4:7-9 say, "Jesus answered, 'It is written in the Scriptures: "You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him."'" In John 4:23 Jesus says to the woman at the well: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."

To worship the Lord is to agree with what He has revealed of Himself in His Word and in His creation. And, when we do this, it is a blessed and wonderful activity. Worship is one of the greatest and most ennobling and healing things we can do.

It is important for us to recognize, however, that just because we came to church this morning is no guarantee that we have worshiped. Certainly the church experience can and should be an aid to worship. The beauty of the sanctuary, the symbols on the Communion Table, stained glass windows, and certainly the music can help us worship. Some things that I say or that Louann says or the worship of the people around us can assist us in getting our worship juices flowing. But, ultimately, worship is a free will, intentional, offering each of us lifts up to the Lord. At some point we have to commit ourselves to worship. We have to open our hearts, free our tongues, and give our minds, bodies, and emotions permission to worship God. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us in worship. **They that worship the Lord shall worship Him in spirit and in truth.**

The first step in the upward journey is to worship the Lord by

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agreeing with what He has revealed about Himself. The second step or motion in our upward journey is to agree with what God says about who we are in Christ. To do this will be a major change in how many of us view ourselves. Many people are in the habit of judging themselves by the standards of this world and they seek their significance through worldly means and from the opinions of other people. There are a lot of comparisons that go on in this process. Young men compare muscles, the beauty of their girlfriends, and cars. Older men compare cars, educations, jobs, houses, and golf and/or bowling scores. Old men compare retirement plans. Women put a lot of emphasis on their hair and make-up, the accomplishments of their children, and the approval of their husbands. They also find significance in their educations and in their jobs.

All of this sounds very natural and is more or less taken for granted. But, hear this: If you are judging your worth, basing your identity, or gaining your significance from any material thing, any human word or opinion of man, or any relationship or anything that you can lose, you are basing your life on the wrong thing. There is only one place we can go to get the truth about who we are and that is in the Word of God.

At first, that's a very humbling experience. We find out that we are sinners, that we are all like sheep that have gone astray and turned to our own ways. We find out that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But, then we learn the astounding truth that God loves us so much, even while we are still sinners, He makes a way for us to be forgiven through the sacrifice of His Son. And, once we have come to Jesus Christ and have received Him as Savior and Lord, we become new creations. We become brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ. We become beloved daughters and sons of God.

It's painful to have to confront this fact, but I think most of us do not take this good news nearly as seriously as we should. I say this because if we really did agree with God's assessment of who we are in Christ, we'd be a whole lot more joyful and a whole lot more passionate in our worship. We would also be a whole lot more eager to share this good news with others.

The present state of many Christians reminds me of the classic story of the Prince and the Pauper, only in this case Christians living as paupers don't know that they are really princes and princesses of the Kingdom. And, even those who

know the truth intellectually, haven't allowed the truth to sink in concretely. It's true in our heads, but it isn't real in our hearts. The upward journey invites us to hear and take to heart what God has to say about who we are in Jesus Christ. In I John 3:1-2 John exclaims, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. 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." **If anyone is in Christ He or she is a new creation, a child of God, a princess or a prince in God's realm.**

The upward journey of Lent leads us to worship God and also leads us to a new assessment of who we are as persons in Christ. The third motion in the upward journey leads us to appreciate the authority we have in this world under the authority of Christ. Ephesians 2:6 says, "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus," While it is true that we still live on earth it is equally true that we are with Christ in the heavenly realms. And, if we will receive this truth by faith and meditate on this truth until we can close our eyes and see ourselves there, we will be able to do more on this earth than we could ever hope or imagine ourselves doing otherwise.

Those of you who remember God's word to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, will remember that God gave them authority on earth and over the earth. Genesis 1:28 says, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" After Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were cast out of the garden and Satan became the prince and power of the air. Nothing now is quite as it should be and some of what we see now is far from God's original design. Mankind has neglected his authority, abused his authority, and allowed Satan to rule in his stead.

But the good news is that things have been reversed in Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrated His authority by casting out demons, healing all manner of illnesses, walking on water, calming storms, cursing an unproductive fig tree, turning water into wine. He once instructed a fish to bring a coin from the sea

to pay the Temple tax. He gave similar authority to His disciples who received the Holy Spirit and followed in His steps. You may find this hard to believe, but the truth is that as children of God and as princes and princesses of the realm of God, you and I who believe in Jesus today also have been endowed with authority to minister under His authority. There is nothing that He and the early disciples did that we cannot potentially do also if and when He leads us to do it. If we are in Christ and standing on the authority of Christ, the demons have to obey us. Natural and supernatural forces have to pay attention to us. We are regents of God, and when we are filled with the Holy Spirit and minister under the direction of the Spirit, we minister with all the authority of Almighty God backing us up.

Listen carefully once again to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:18-23, Paul says: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

Right now we who believe in Christ are the children of God. We are the regents of God. The power of the Spirit in us is just like that mighty power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Beloved, there remains before us an upward journey. Let us Worship the Lord for Who He is, and believe we are who He says we are, that we may exercise the authority He gives us for the praise of His glory.

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Ephesians 1:15-2:10

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