

“As Far as the Western Sea” / Deuteronomy 34:1-12 / 26 October 2014

One last time, God led Moses up a mountain, and from there God showed him the whole Promised Land, as far as the western sea. “I give it to your descendants forever,” the Spirit whispered, “but you...you shall not cross over into it.” And after one long, slow look at the thing he'd struggled over forty years to attain, after one first and only peek, Moses died on the mountaintop, old and full of years. Did he die happy? Was it enough to finally see the fruit of his life's labors from afar? Or did he die unsatisfied, longing to cross over into the new land with all the others? Ah, well, in any case, Moses got more than most of us ever get. He got a vision of what his life had amounted to; he got to see what his living and laboring had added to the life of the world. He didn't get to cross over, but he did get to see what his life had been about, what he'd accomplished, what his sometimes frustrating and lonely efforts had afforded the people he loved. I hope when our hour comes that all of us are afforded that clarity, that perspective. If you could survey your life and its purpose from some lofty height, what might you see?

In the month of October, I'm not satisfied to merely take walks in the woods to see the fall colors. No, regular hikes under the trees are fine in August, but in October, it's always my goal to get up high, high onto some mountain or hill and gaze out over the bright autumnal countryside, rusty-colored reds, and browns, and yellows as far as the eye can see. In October, I seek out hard to reach “overlooks,” deep in the woods, where you can climb up on top of some ridge of windswept boulders and see for many miles. In fact, on my last day off, I hiked two steep grueling miles, over sharp rocks slick and treacherous with wet leaves. The trail led seven hundred feet straight up into the early morning cloud cover. My goal was just to gaze out over Uniontown, and the surrounding countryside, 1,200 feet below. It was a beautiful climb in the yellows woods, silver with mist, the tree trunks black like marble pillars. The beauty was dreamlike; it felt like a film. I had read that from the overlook, on a clear day, you can see all the way to West Virginia. Of course, it never occurred to me that the same mist that made the October forest so lovely was a raincloud, hanging over the summit of the mountain, and when I reached the ridge-top, all I would see from up there would be more cloud.

In time, the wind began to scatter the cloud over the rocks all around. You could see the ghostly wisps of white vapor rushing between the boulders, the mists of the world streaming over the tallest peak between here and the Ozarks. Uniontown gradually emerged from the mists, far below. And so did many other things: the road I'd driven in on, forests, and fields, and faraway villages, and a few ugly industrial sites. I could see cars and trucks and even a train, all the people of the world going about their business, unaware that I was watching. It all looked so small from up there. The world itself looked manageable and safe, as if any of its problems were surely well within hand. You get a new perspective when you remove yourself from the fray and frenzy of daily life and pause to stare down upon the world from some dizzy height. Surely you know the feeling I'm talking about. Surely at some time in your life, from atop the Empire State Building, or from the window of a descending airplane, or perhaps from the very spot I'm describing, you looked down upon the busy world and thought, “There's got to be a good way forward for me, for us, for this troubled human race and its long-suffering planet. I might not have believed it from down there, but from up here it all looks so orderly, and meaningful, and right.” Yes, it takes distance to give us a sense of perspective. That's one of the reasons I seek out the lofty heights in October.

I tell you, once—just once—when I'd separated myself from the busy world of women and men to climb up to some grand woodland vista and gaze down on it all, just once, I think I might have had a moment of clarity—but I'm not really sure. If it happened, it was monumental, an instance of enlightenment the likes of which only come once or twice in a lifetime, if that. It was like the Buddha under his bodhi tree, or even Jesus coming up out of the waters of the Jordan at his baptism, whatever he saw that drove him out into the wilderness for forty days. It was big. I had a moment when of a sudden the truth of it all snapped into place. And in that moment of epiphany, staring down on the world below, I grasped the whole economy of the cosmos and my own small but necessary place in it. I

understood why bad things happen to good people; I knew where evil comes from; I comprehended the mysteries of infinity, and time, and space, and the pre-existence of God. You know, for most of us, it's not so much that we need to see the Guy behind the curtain; it's just that want some assurance that whoever's back there is capable and kind. And in that moment, the curtain was parted, at least I think it was. I saw it all. The answer to all our troubles and questions was amazingly simple; it had been right there under our noses all along. I breathed a calm and satisfied sigh, knowing in my deepest spirit that all was well, truly, perfectly well. It all made sense. But then, something happened. An acorn fell on my head. A fly landed on my nose. I don't know, but I lost my train of thought, and just like that, it was gone. Before I could get a pen to write it all down, the moment passed, like the mists of the world blowing over the rocks. And now, for the life of me, I cannot remember what it was. I almost believe that that's a true story. But the part I am sure of is the fact that I came down off that mountain somehow reassured that there are answers to the questions we're asking, that there is a bigger picture, even though the clouds obscure it.

Perhaps we'll never get to see the “bigger picture” of our lives and our world. Perhaps we will get to see it. Can we be satisfied with the knowledge that there is a bigger picture, that life is good, that love is real, that dreams are worth pursuing? Well, I don't know. Maybe you and I could be satisfied with vague sentiments like that, but old Moses is not a sentimental kind of guy. Moses speaks with authority...and carries a big stick. Moses used to argue with God, and on a few occasions in the Book of Exodus, Moses even changed God's mind! Moses had one task in life and one task only, and he was always climbing up mountains to get away from people in order to gain clarity on how to accomplish his task. It was Moses' job to get the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and deliver them to their own country. It took him forty long years to do it, too. Forty years to walk four hundred miles! That's the distance from here to the lighthouse on Montauk Point, at the tip of Long Island. Even just walking ten miles a day, for the sake of the elderly and the small children, you could still get there in forty days. But Moses' life was about the journey as much as the destination, as it has become popular to say these days. Moses' life was about the road. It was a life of frustrations, and losing the way, uprisings and rebellions. Moses was the traveler, not the settler. It wouldn't have worked for him to enter the Promised Land. Israel needed a whole different kind of leadership now. But don't be sad for old Moses; in the end, he got to see what all his life's labors had been worth—the Promised Land, his mission accomplished. He died having seen the bigger picture of his life and its purpose—and few of us ever get to see that. Moses also got to be part of something bigger than himself...and all of us get that!

Clarity! Clarity, what people won't do for just one precious moment, however fleeting, of true clarity! To see where they've been and where they're going, to have it all laid out in front of them like a map from beginning to end. The myth is that alcoholics drink to drown their sorrows. It's surely true of some, but I think just as many drink in a counterproductive attempt to find clarity. In a quest for clarity, people get lost in addictions; they fall in with cults. Even people who engage in loud, dangerous activities will tell you that there's sometimes a silent moment, just as the snowmobile slides headlong into the tree, or the dirt-bike turns upside down and drops on top of them, or the bull tosses them from its back and turns to chase them, or when the parachute acts like it's not going to open...there comes a moment when they feel a deep sense of euphoria and even peace, as if they've just seen what life is about. It never lasts long, and they have to keep engaging in that same activity in hopes of someday regaining it, and it might never return, but there comes a moment that feels like clarity about life, and love, and the world we live in. Everyone is seeking clarity, and if so many of us choose to seek it in lofty mountain grandeur, as the hymn says it, it's not just beauty we seek; it's a sense that there's an integrity to the whole of things, that the pieces all fit together somehow. What do you do to achieve clarity? Whatever it is, is it working?

The hardest thing to see with real clarity is yourself. Today is Reformation Sunday, a day when we reflect back on the events of the 1500s, when our kind of church was born. The reformers, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli—who has surely the most wonderful sounding name in all

history—they held a mirror up to the face of a corrupt, power-hungry, ungodly rich and violent church. That church didn't like what it saw, but instead of changing, it resorted again to violence in order to secure its power over the nations of Europe. This isn't a condemnation of Catholicism; the Middle Ages were...medieval. And things always get ugly when religion grasps for power instead of influence—a lesson that Protestants are learning, too. If a wise and gentle man like Francis had been pope, history might have unrolled very differently. But the world wasn't ready yet for a Francis. Perhaps it still isn't. And yet, who would even consider taking up arms against another because of religious differences today? If you declared a war of religion today, no one would bother to show up. We don't always understand each other, but here in the western world, a real respect and cooperation exists between Catholics and Protestants today. It took centuries to happen, but with time, the clouds blew over the mountaintop; we saw the bigger picture, and realized that there's nothing here to fight about. Would that we had seen it back then so that we could have been spared the 100 Years War, and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and all the troubles in Northern Ireland.

When we reach the top of the mountain, don't you think people will look back on today and ask, "Now, what exactly were we fighting about again? Why?" Would that extremists in Iraq, partisans in Israel, people in all the troubled places of this globe could climb a high mountain and look down on the world from up there! Would that our own political leaders, too, could spend an hour looking down from above, seeing this world in the greater perspective of its connectedness; then their own priorities might begin to take shape in faithfulness to the wisdom of the faith traditions that most of them claim to follow. But it takes time to gain clarity. It takes distance. If you've ever tried to forgive someone (yourself included), or let go, or move on, then you know that. You've got to do the hard work of climbing the mountain in order to get there, but the view is worth the climb.

I looked for a joke about mountains. None of them can be told from the pulpit. I looked for a joke about seeing, and none of them were funny. I looked for jokes about clarity and perspective, just to lighten the mood of the sermon, but the joke writers have yet to tackle those issues. Maybe there doesn't have to be a joke today. You see, into every life there comes a quiet moment when we look around and realize, perhaps with some disappointment or resignation, "So this is what I've amounted to, this is what I am to live as and die as, this is what I'll be known for." But unlike Moses, we've never gotten to see the view from above. We do not see ourselves and our life's challenges as they are. We're too close to see them clearly. What will it take for you to achieve clarity? For Moses, it took silence, and solitude, and forty years! It can take years, years to see a situation clearly. There is a bigger picture, for you and for our world, though we may not see it now. Beyond the clouds that obstruct our view, there is a sweeping panorama that makes all things clear. Perhaps someday we'll get to see it. Until that day, we can trust that it's there. Amen.