The Mount That God Desires

May 24th, 2020

7th Sunday of Easter

Mountains, cloud formations and stars are among the physical things I am most grateful for. They always draw the gaze upward. Last year, I was blessed with two separate journeys to the Rocky Mountains—in midsummer and later in the early winter. During both journeys, I experienced depths of contemplation with the Lord that I had never had before. One reason may be that nature is forever beautiful, forever proclaiming the glory of God. Another reason may be that nature is *the old normal*, the realm that humbles us and reminds us of what is natural and God-given. Throughout scripture, mountains are places of rest, revelation, law, testing, victory, transfiguration, proclamation, crucifixion, and even ascension (Genesis 8:4, Genesis 22, Exodus 20, 1 Kings 18:16-45, Isaiah 60:14, Mark 9, Matthew 5-7, Matthew 26, Luke 23, Mark 15, Luke 24, Acts 1). Today, we remember that Jesus ascended to the Father from the Mount of Olives. Again and again, God is drawing us upward to heaven. And when we seek to inhabit God, who would inhabit us, God draws us toward His habitation, which is in heaven. In ascending to heaven, Jesus goes ahead of us, as he said he would, to prepare a place for us, but also to send us the Holy Spirit: “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’” (Luke 24:45-49).

A mountain would not have shortened the distance for Jesus to ascend; Jesus could have ascended from any place. Instead he ascended a familiar, nearby mountain, the Mount of Olives, before ascending fully to the Father. Perhaps there is a lesson here—our ascents begin with small, familiar mountains. Mountains are natural bridges of the earthly and heavenly; perhaps in selecting a nearby mountain, the same mountain where he had suffered his agony in the garden, Jesus invites us to make our pilgrimage upward from the place of our agony into the place of his glory. In reflecting on the ascension, Paul speaks of the power that Jesus has bestowed upon us: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:17-23). Our newspapers, television programs, podcasts, websites and social media are filled with all kinds of names, and we immerse ourselves in these names every day, looking to many of them for knowledge, wisdom, wealth, empowerment, justice, comfort, counsel, vindication, and even spiritual growth. And yet, there is a name above every other name, the name of salvation itself (Acts 4:12), in whom the power of God is at work, in whom we have a glorious inheritance. And in His prayer Paul asks that God grant the followers of Christ at Ephesus two remarkable gifts—a spirit of wisdom and revelation that their hearts might be enlightened and they might know what hope is. Our ascent as spiritual pilgrims, then, is an ascent to hope. An ascent to hope through wisdom and revelation.

Our ascent requires wisdom. The wisdom of God, however, is not always what we would expect. Paul says something quite provocative when writing to the Corinthians: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (1 Corinthians 1:27-31). The wisdom of humanity is obsessed with power, prestige, reputation, technique, programming, form, material benefits and a very strange notion of what is right or wrong. It is utilitarian and easy to sell in the short term. The wisdom of God looks like a narrow backroad through wilderness, yet the Proverbs say: “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy” (Proverbs 3:13-18). Being wise in Christ is our happiness. It is interesting that wisdom is called a tree of life—in contrast to the tree of knowledge.

The ancient spiritual writers all distinguish between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Christ. St. Seraphim of Sarov once said, “Excessive concern for the cares of this life is a sign of someone who’s mean-spirited and a non-believer. And it’s a disaster if we are so bent on looking after ourselves that we don’t depend on God, who makes provision for everything for us.” St. Anthony remarks: “Men are often called intelligent wrongly. Intelligent men are not those who are erudite in the sayings and books of the wise men of old, but those who have an intelligent soul can discriminate between good and evil. They avoid what is sinful and harms the soul; and with deep gratitude to God they resolutely adhere by dint of practice to what is good and benefits the soul. These men alone should truly be called intelligent.” In our age of experts, the path of knowledge and wisdom can seem fractious, mercenary, combative, arrogant, manipulative, shrill, petty, myopic, and even destructive. James says that the wisdom of Christ is nothing like that: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27); “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:13-18). Christ is our wisdom. Whether it is in what he says, in how he says it, in what he enacts, in how he enacts it, Christ forever reveals the wisdom of God for us, a humble wisdom of beatitude and hope, drawing us ever to higher summits, to that source of wisdom above.

Our ascent also requires the spirit of revelation. Ultimately, it is God whom we want to see revealed. In the first annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises,* Ignatius of Loyola writes: “For, just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of the spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul” (Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works.* Ed. George E. Ganss, S.J., New York: Paulist Press, 1991. 121). Wherever we travel in life, we are seeking God, seeking a manifestation of God in our life; we are seeking God’s will that we might be with God. In sorrow or joy, in hardship and leisure, in poverty or wealth, in illness or health, we search for what grace God would give to us, what part of His divine life He would share with us in those moments, what gift of God we might share with someone else. Thus, Meister Eckhart writes: “Whatever God may then send him, let him accept it directly from God himself and let him regard it as the best of all that could come to him, and let him be wholly and utterly at peace with it” (“Counsels on Discernment” in *Selections from His Essential Writings.* Tr. Edmund Colledge, OSA and Bernard McGinn, New York: HarperOne, 2005, 50). In the same lecture, he remarks: “Then we talked about one man who was supposed to be beginning a completely new life, and I said something like this: he ought to become a man who seeks for God and finds God in all things, always, everywhere, with everyone, in every way. Doing this, we can always go on growing and increasing, and never come to the end of our increasing” (53).

It may not be a season of physical mountain climbing right now, but it is always a season of spiritual ascent. In our daily ascent, let us discern between what is worldly and what is holy, between the many peaks of Bashan and the mountain that God desires. Human beings are strange creatures in that they cannot be complete unless they transcend themselves. As one theologian has expressed it—*nothing short of divinization will satisfy humanity.* Though mortal, we must become immortal. Though temporary, we must become eternal. Though foolish, we must become wise. Though sorrowful, we must become joyful. All of this is given through Christ our Lord who brings us back to Eden. It is the heart of the gospel: “The Reformer, John Calvin, wrote, ‘The end of the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us’ and even Martin Luther said, ‘God pours out Christ His dear Son over us and pours Himself into us and draws us into Himself, so that He becomes completely humanified and we become completely deified and everything is altogether one thing, God, Christ, and you.’” (NR Interview, “A New Book Explains Why We Are All ‘Broken Gods’, *National Review,* June 10, 2015). Christ ascended to the Father because that is the path being opened up for us—an ascent up to God Himself. Come, brothers and sisters, let us ascend the mountain of the Lord!