

Climb Ev'ry Mountain

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Mountain Experience (SLIDE #1 VOLCANIC MOUNTAIN)

I've only climbed one mountain in my life, but I know even from that single experience that it takes a tremendous amount of perseverance. The mountain I climbed is on the island of St. Vincent in the eastern Caribbean, where my dad and stepmother spent three years as United Church overseas ministry personnel. St. Vincent is a volcanic island, mountainous and covered in lush tropical forest. The biggest mountain of all is- Soufriere the volcano that gave birth to St. Vincent. And one day during my stay there, one very long, very hot, exhausting day, I climbed that mountain to the edge of the crater. The climb up that mountain was far and away the single most physically demanding thing I've ever done in my life- it just went on and on and on for hours with no end in sight. At one point we stopped to rest, and I lay down in the middle of the path, with rocks sticking into my back, and roots under my neck, and I could and would have easily fallen asleep right there if my guide Johnny had not kept poking my feet, much to my annoyance at the time.

All told our walk lasted from 7:30 in the morning till about 3:30 in the afternoon- a long slow vertical marathon- of one foot in front of the other. Not exactly a marathon of hope, more like a marathon of sheer desperation.

Moving is Mountainous (SLIDE #2 UNPACKING BOXES)

Just this past week, John and I finally moved into our house here in Belleville. Anyone who has moved knows that this task too takes a tremendous amount of perseverance. And there is definitely a way in which moving has something in common with mountain climbing. Just for the record, I want to say that you know that this photo of the couple moving in is totally staged- no one looks that happy when they are in the midst of moving! Whether you are in

the packing, transporting or unpacking stage, it just seems to go on and on with no end in sight. In fact during our own move, I kept hearing a line from a song by folk singer Tracey Chapman running on a continuous loop in my head “and mountains and mountains of things, and mountains and mountains of things”. Is there any one of us who does not feel amazed, or possibly even a little horrified at the amount of things- of stuff it is possible for us to accumulate and live with? Things that we’d forgotten we had, things we were sure we’d gotten rid of, things we didn’t even know we had, and most ridiculous of all, things we never unpacked from the last move, that we still feel we have to cart with us to the next place. We didn’t take it out or use it, and we may not take it out or use it at the next place either, but we still have it, and we still want to have it.

Life is Mountainous

I wonder if sometimes we don’t treat our faith- our relationship with God in Christ, like one of those boxes of things that we have, but don’t unpack. One of those things that we cart around with us, but don’t really use the way it was intended. One of those things we keep carefully wrapped up in bubble wrap to preserve it so it won’t get dirty, worn, or bruised. One of those things that we can lose track of, one of those things that can get buried amongst all the other mountains and mountains of things, obligations, relationships, that make up our lives. And as that box migrates little by little to the back of the garage or basement, so we migrate little by little away from a sense of real connection to God.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus has something to say about faith and mountains. He is confronted by a father whose son is suffering from terrible seizures, a boy his disciples were not able to help. Whether the cause of his illness was physical, mental or spiritual doesn’t really matter- these unpredictable, unsightly, and frightening seizures meant mountain sized trouble for this boy and his father. The boy, despite his father’s love, was likely something of a family embarrassment, perhaps people were even afraid of him, and didn’t want to have him around in case one of his fits came on and turned him instantly from a smiling boy into a

twitching, salivating wreck on the ground. That's what a mountain of trouble looks like. A mountain of trouble big enough to make a person feel overwhelmed, a mountain big enough to make a person feel like their connection to God is very far away.

(SLIDE #3 SEEDS IN HAND)

So what are the mountains in your life- the challenges that loom over you, the path that seems too steep to climb, the burdens that threaten to bury you in worry, discouragement, obligation, or just plain exhaustion? Maybe it's health concerns for yourself or someone you love, maybe it's the reality of aging, the pain of losing a loved one, the combined tightrope walk and juggling act that is parenting in the 21st century. We are well reminded today, on the 30th anniversary of Terry Fox's remarkable effort to run across this country on one good leg of how large the mountain of cancer looms in the lives of so many. Or maybe things in your own life are going pretty well, but you feel confronted with a sense of powerless in the face of the state of our world today- so much suffering, so much selfishness, so much indifference. What good is a tiny little seed of faith, my poor little seed of faith in the face of huge mountains like that?

A Little Faith Moves Mountains

That's the question that we can't help but ask in the face of Jesus' pithy little pronouncement about mustard seed sized faith moving mountains. There is a modern parable about a woman gardener and a mountain that might be able to help us.

This parable tells the story of a mother and daughter's visit to the flower garden of Gene and Dale Bauer in Running Springs California in the San Bernardino Mountains. The mother is reluctant to make the trip at first because of a heavy fog, but as they walk up the path to the garden the mist clears and in her own words

(SLIDE #4 DAFFODILS)

Before me lay the most glorious sight. It looked as though someone had taken a great vat of gold and poured it down over the mountain peak and slopes. The flowers were planted in majestic, swirling patterns, great ribbons and swaths of deep orange, white, lemon yellow, salmon pink, saffron, and butter yellow. Each different-coloured variety was planted as a group so that it swirled and flowed like its own river with its own unique hue. Five acres of flowers.

Now I'm the furthest thing from a gardener, but I know that this mountain flower garden took a tremendous amount of perseverance. Those five acres of flowers did not happen overnight, or in the course of one year, or two or even ten. Those five acres of tulips and daffodils began with just twelve bulbs planted by Gene Bauer in 1957. Every year for fifty years since Gene—who describes herself as a woman with “two hands, two feet and very little brain”—each year Gene planted more bulbs, each one with her own hands. And with each planted bulb, with each passing year, their mountainside was transformed.

(SLIDE #5 BULBS)

Gene saw the mountainside in its entirety, but she transformed it into that glorious garden the only way she could, by planting one bulb at a time, every fall for over four decades. And perhaps that is something of what Jesus meant when he referred to our seed sized faith having the power to move a mountain of trouble. Perhaps he meant that we should focus on the life *giving* power in that small, seed of faith, rather than on the life *draining* power of those mountains in our lives. Let's be real- we will all have mountains to face. No one gets a straight flat well paved road from beginning to end- life just isn't like that. Heartbreak, loss, betrayal, physical frailty, the troubles of the world, they all loom over us at one time or another. But Jesus promises us that even our tiny seeds of faith can help to move them and move over them, even as they threaten to throw us down and fall on top of us. Jesus says trust the power of that seed.

There are people here today who are staring at a mountain of trouble- who may leave here today, wondering where their strength, their hope, their joy is possibly going to come from. And if that's you, *when* that's you, then be assured that in your seed of faith, tiny though it may seem, fragile though it may seem, unimpressive as it may seem, is the power of the risen Christ. In your tiny fragile, unimpressive seed of faith is the power of the risen Christ who has moved past the great mountain of death itself, who is alive in this whole world, and who loves you. Christ says trust the power of that seed.

(SLIDE #6 FLOWERS)

I know a little about faith, and I can tell you that it takes perseverance. I can also tell you that God will honour that perseverance. God will bless that tiny seed, help it to root and grow and flower if you will take it out of the box, unwrap it and put it out into the world. And if my word alone isn't good enough for you, let me add the voice of the apostle Paul who writes in his letter to the Romans- For "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And just in case Paul's word isn't enough to convince you let me add the more recent voice of Marvin Gaye who offers the same sentiment Motown style.

There ain't no mountain high enough

Ain't no valley low enough

Ain't no river wide enough

To keep me from getting to you.

Trust the seed to see you over the mountain. Thanks be to God, AMEN.