

In January 2015, rock climbers Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson “completed the first free climb of the Dawn Wall of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. At the time, their 19-day ascent was considered by some as the hardest successful rock climb in history.”ⁱ

If that wasn’t an amazing feat within itself, Tommy did this with a missing top portion of his index finger, a key finger in rock climbing. Tommy had lost this part of his finger in an accident a couple year previously.

Nothing could stop Tommy from pursuing his dream, even his hurt finger, and he invited his friend Kevin along for the ride. Tommy had tenacity. He was determined beyond belief to reach his goal.

In this the six-week of our sermon series on the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul we celebrate that Paul was tenacious. He refused to give up. He continued to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, even when it put his life in danger. In “Which Way Lord” Rob Fuquay tells about a time in which Paul showed great tenacity. He had been warned by his friends and a prophet not to go to Jerusalem because it was too dangerous (Acts 21:11). Paul responded by saying: “For I am ready...even to die in Jerusalem for the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

Paul devoted his whole life to Jesus Christ, and he wouldn’t let anything get in the way of him doing the thing that Christ had called him to do.

Today, on this Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate the tenacity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus continued to press forward even with many obstacles along his way, and to their credit the disciples followed him.

When we started this series, we heard the call stories of many of the disciples. We journeyed beside them as they were sent out into mission the name of Jesus, we heard Jesus encourage them to be “the light of the world” and we saw them witness Jesus stilling a storm.

Here is this moment of the Transfiguration we see that Jesus chose three disciples, Peter, James, and John to be with him, perhaps because he knew that they would be the ones to take “the good news” the farthest. Or maybe as commentary suggest, just as King David had an inner circle of three, so Christ the king does as well as he is “redefining kingship.”ⁱⁱ

This moment was reminiscent of the times in the book of Exodus that Moses would go up to the mountain of the Lord to be in the presence of God.

Also again we see God appear in the pillar of cloud, the same way God led the Israelites through the wilderness.

When Moses came down from the mountain his face would be shining, and he would share with the Israelites a message from God.

In the same way, these three disciples journeyed with Jesus up the mountain and heard the voice of God telling them that Jesus was his son, with whom he was well pleased. These were the same words spoken at Jesus’ baptism, reiterating to the disciples God’s point, this is the Son of God. For the disciples, this is different than a prophet or a priest, this is God in human form.

Instead of the disciples faces shining, it was Jesus who shone brightly once again showing his identity of the Son of God. Just as God led the Israelites in the form of fire during the night, now Jesus leads the people of God through the light of his life and witness to God.

This was a very special moment for this inner circle of disciples to get to also encounter Elijah and Moses. But why is this so significant?

Some scholars believe in this moment God shows the fulfilment of the covenant from the Old Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ Other scholars share the things Moses and Elijah have in common^{iv}:

- 1) They were initially rejected by the people, but vindicated by God.
- 2) They were advocates of the covenant and the Torah.
- 3) They performed miracles.
- 4) Both were considered by first century Jews to be transcendent figures who did not die and who were taken directly to heaven.

Moses and Elijah represent the heavenly world to which Jesus also belongs.^v

Immediately Peter springs to action. He asks if he should build them a tent. Through this action, Peter shows that he wants this moment to never end. Like the people of God created the tabernacle for God to dwell which inhabited the ark of the covenant, so Peter wanted to create a place for Jesus, Elijah and Moses to reside forever.

Like Peter we all have mountaintop experiences that we never want to end. These are the moments where we so closely feel the presence of God that we want time to stop.

Maybe you are having a mountaintop experience today. You don't want it to end and want to do everything in your power to keep feeling so close to God. You want to camp out on the mountain and never come down.

Or perhaps today you find yourself in the valley. Much like the Israelites must have sometimes felt far away from God who would meet with Moses on the mountain, sometimes we all may feel that God is far away from us.

When the disciples hear the voice of God from the cloud, immediately they are afraid and bow down. The next thing they know Jesus taps them on the shoulder and tells them not to be afraid, acting like nothing has happened.

Then he tells them not to tell anyone until after his resurrection. Of course, they want to tell people. I mean if we just witnessed the presence of God through the cloud and saw Elijah and Moses, we would all tell everyone we saw what happened.

So, they walk down the mountain and what happened on the mountain with Jesus stayed on the mountain. The disciples could not unsee what they had seen, and I think this experience strengthened their faith more than any other experience with Jesus.

I often wonder on the day of Pentecost when Peter saw the tongues of fire, if he thought back to the moment of the transfiguration and then felt compelled to preach his first and very powerful sermon.

What is beautiful about this moment is that it was shared between the three disciples. This way I think they could assure each other that this really did happen.

What is wonderful about discipleship is that it is something we do together. Just as the disciples were sent out two by two and experienced the transfiguration in a group of three, the Apostle Paul “seldom traveled alone.”^{vi} Fuquay reminds us that “accomplishing anything significant in life requires support...Perhaps Paul never quits because he surrounds himself with friends, allies, and supporters.”^{vii}

Often in life we are more likely to succeed if we have the support of our family and friends.

Up on another mountain, El Capitan, professional rock climber, Tommy Caldwell was encouraging his friend Kevin Jorgeson to complete a particularly difficult portion of the climb up the wall.

The goal for these two climbers was to reach the top together. But after days of climbing Kevin was unable to complete a difficult pitch of rock. He told his friend Tommy that he would continue to belay him to the top, even though he himself would not finish.

Tommy went along with this plan for about two days. He climbed higher and higher. He went through the most difficult portion of the mountain and was elated; however, the moment was bittersweet. He knew he could not complete his dream without the friend he started with.

So, he told his friend Kevin, that he would not finish the climb without him. So, with the eyes of the nation on Kevin he tried the pitch over and over again for a week straight with no success until the seventh day where he finally completed pitch 15.

Tommy and Kevin were able to finish their climb together, both embodying incredible tenacity.

We as disciples of Christ have this characteristic within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues to tell us don't give up, continue the fight for God.

And so, we also do this for one another. We encourage each other and don't leave each other behind. Sometimes all it takes is a bit of encouragement to help someone pursue God's calling upon their lives.

For me, it took my friend Denise, inviting me to a writing conference. It was expensive, I made excuse after excuse for why I could not go, but the Holy Spirit within me kept telling me to go.

So, I wrote my book proposal, with the encouragement of Denise and others, and am now in the process of writing a book to encourage other people in their calls.

I never would have gone through with this without the prodding of Denise and the Holy Spirit.

So, who are you today? Are you like Peter having a mountaintop experience and never wanting it to end? Are you the one who is encouraging others or are you the one that needs to be encouraged to be tenacious?

One of our greatest gifts as the body of Christ is tenacity. It means we don't give up on God and we don't give up on each other.

It means that we put our trust in God, even when we don't understand. It means that we continue to follow Jesus Christ, even when we are unsure, we can climb the mountain.

Today we give thanks for the tenacity of Jesus Christ who did God's will every day, we give thanks for the disciples and the Apostle Paul who kept going, even in the face of great difficulties all for the glory of God.

May we be great cheerleaders for one another, and may we celebrate our God given tenacity so that we, like the disciples and the Apostle Paul, may never give up sharing the “good news” as often as we can. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tommy_Caldwell

ⁱⁱ New Interpreter's Biblical Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 363.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Rob Fuquay. “Which Way, Lord?” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN. 2017. P. 106.

^{vii} Ibid. P. 107.

Additional Resources

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11337868/Worlds-best-climber-only-has-nine-fingers-the-life-and-times-of-Tommy-Caldwell.html>

Oremus online NRSV Bible.