

**On top of the Mountain and at the base... and everywhere in between –
Matthew 17:1-21**

It was 7:00 in the morning when 8 members of my hiking group reached the base of the mountain we had chosen to climb that day. It was 1998 and I was just about to move to Portugal, so this was to be our last climb together. In any climb there are two parts that I really dislike: **going up** and **coming down**... the rest is awesome! This climb the **going up** did not start easily! Within the first km we were fighting for breath. As we slowly made our way up we were blessed with incredible views of the surrounding mountains and we could pick out deep cut valleys where we saw moose and bear far below. We kept pushing forward for another couple of hours until we finally arrived at our first mountain prairie. It was incredible! Still far from the summit but also about 500 metres above the ground the prairie was full of wild flowers of every variety and colour. The grass was so green and so lush and it looked like it had been untouched except for a narrow path winding through it. We stopped there for our snack and simply took in the beauty! About 15 minutes later we started back through prairie to get to the point where we needed to start climbing again. The fog that was at this level was taking much longer to burn off than normal... and that should have caught our attention, but it didn't!

Up we went... 4 more hours of hiking, scrambling, resting, encouraging, and groaning. Finally we were within 200 metres of the top. These last 200 metres were going to be a challenge. The rock was different here. Instead of gravel these were much larger stones, but flat, almost like a shingle. That meant that as we stepped on them they would slide on one another often starting small rock slides. Besides that, it was cold... it's usually much colder on top of a mountain than at its base but this was odd. We hadn't taken off any of our layers and now it was close to noon. There was a dense fog and so the ground was wet. To be honest, we couldn't even see the top of the mountain, it was covered in cloud. Common sense and the fact that we had done this more than a few times, should have told us to stop, turn around and go back. But when you climb... you get what is called **summit fever**... you have to reach the top! You never want to go back home and say "we *almost* got there"... so we pushed on!

Finally we made it to the summit without causing a major rock slide. We sat on top of the world and saw... **nothing** - just clouds and the foggy appearance of each other. I had lunch beside my cousin whom I had convinced to come with me on this little adventure. We joked that where we were sitting could actually be at a place where there was absolutely nothing beneath us... and suddenly there was a gust of wind and the clouds parted and below our feet was a thousand metre drop! We had sat on the edge of a cliff! While we carefully moved ourselves into a more secure position we were in awe at the view we were seeing. This was the highest mountain we had climbed that summer and the view we had made it all worth it... until it started to rain and then we heard thunder! We were exactly where we did not want to be and should not be - On the top of a mountain in a thunder storm! We decided to cut lunch short and head back down.

As we started to move out we saw other hikers below us still determined to climb up (summit fever!!). Each step we took sent showers of rocks on top of them. Getting down without being hurt and without hurting others was going to be a challenge. The rocks were now wet and slippery and it was impossible to know which rocks were stable and which ones were not.

50 metres down and I looked around to see how my cousin was doing. I couldn't see her. I looked behind me and in the fog I caught a glimpse of her... she was still on the summit where we had had lunch. I yelled at her to hurry up as she was too far back, but she didn't move. I called her again and saw her put her head down on her knees and her shoulders started shaking... she was crying! I turned around and went back up. *"Come on Karen... we gotta go, we can't stay here"*. **"I can't Connie, I'm too scared, I can't move... I literally cannot move"**. *"Oh yes you can! You just put one leg here and one hand there and you move!!"*. **"I can't, I'm frozen. You go without me"**. Yeah... like I'm going to leave my cousin on the top of a mountain! I don't think so!! *"Look Karen, I'll go down 2 metres and stop and brace myself, when I'm ready you just slide down into me and I'll stop you. You don't have to do anything but slide"*. And that's what we did. Every two metres for 200 metres I would brace myself to be crashed into by my cousin. We finally made it... she was terrified and I was bruised! But we made it! By the time we

reached the bottom the whole thing actually seemed quite funny (for us, not for her).

When we got back home we couldn't wait to tell everyone what happened. But the story telling had to wait as other things were more important, and so it didn't take very long for our adventure to find its way into the background of daily living only to be pulled out on special moments when for some reason we thought about mountains, hiking and rain!

Transition:

I tell you that story because I want to draw a parallel between hiking up a mountain and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Something we call, missional living and it's how thriving disciples live. Missional living happens on the mountain top; at the base and everywhere in between. There isn't a place where God doesn't want to be an integral part of the journey. The question is: do we have faith enough not only to believe that... but also to live it!?

Let me tell you another mountain top story. This one taught me a lot about missional living... when it's great and encouraging, when its difficult and discouraging, when it's mundane and monotonous, and when its OK and even peaceful.

In the first verses of Mathew 17 Jesus plans to go for a hike in the mountains. He decides to travel light and so he only asks his closest friends to come with him: **Peter, James and John**. I'm guessing the 3 were feeling particularly happy that day – chosen as they were to hang out with Jesus for a while... this would be some real "guy time". Peter was most likely trying to figure out something clever to say... because he has a notorious problem of "over-talking"! Meanwhile James and John were probably playing "*rock, paper, scissors*" to see who would walk up the mountain with Jesus on his right side and who would go on his left!

We're told that the mountain they walked up was a high one so we know that this journey was going to take a while. Yes, even when hiking with Jesus, to get to the top of the mountain, you have to have to climb! Climbing up is hard work. It's hot, it's dusty, it's hard to breathe, and your legs and your lungs hurt. There's usually

complaining on the way up! It starts pleasant enough... a gentle stroll at the base but when you hit the steep parts... and when Peter's in that group... somebody is going to say something! The only thing that keeps anyone climbing is the goal! You deal with the pain and exhaustion, you stop talking and just focus... you want to reach the summit... and that's what Peter, James and John do... right beside Jesus.

When they get to the top (in v.2-3), huffing and puffing; sweating like... men... Jesus suddenly changes! Biblically we call this the transfiguration... in other words, what happened was that Jesus looked like what he looks like now in his glorified state. If you want to know what that means then take a look at Revelation 1:12-16! That's what they saw! I mean, minutes before Jesus was a 30 something year old guy who had just hiked up a mountain... and now... Jesus looks like, well, God!

And then, suddenly... Moses and Elijah show up! Moses... Israel's greatest prophet and leader above all leaders! And Elijah... the prophet who would announce the Messiah's arrival, the guy who went to Heaven in chariot of fire.

Well, James and John completely freeze up... but Peter... ah Peter, he just can't stop himself! He breaks in and offers to build some tents (where he thinks he has the materials for tent building on the top of the mountain, I do not know). There are historical and theological reasons for what Peter was offering to do but we don't have time to look at it. In any case, it's enough to say that Peter's timing was off and his suggestion was... kind of inappropriate for the moment!

So, we have Jesus as looks today; we have Moses who represents the Old Testament covenant and the promise of Salvation; and we have Elijah who is the appointed restorer of all things and now in v. 5 God arrives! Thunder, lightning (every good mountain story has them) besides, when God appears nature can't contain itself – and God confirms and encourages His Son!

Finally... something that **can even stop Peter from talking!** I mean “come on” this... is... AWESOME! Jesus, Moses, Elijah and God! REALLY!!! We talk about “mountain-top experiences” but this... this is the ultimate mountain top experience!

When the disciples finally come around (v. 8) everything has gone back to normal and Jesus looks like his 30-something self again! But these guys... these guys have been touched, moved, shocked and awe-struck.

All the way down the mountain they talk about what happened (v.9). They want to know what happened and why it happened... and Jesus patiently answers them all. Going down the mountain is the time for the disciples to “de-brief”... to think and process what they experienced at the top of the mountain. In the end, Jesus tells his friends not to tell anyone what they saw and experienced... and this might be the biggest miracle of all... because it appears that they kept their promise!

These guys were elated! This has been the most incredible experience of their discipleship training and probably their lives! So in v. 12 we find our disciples reunited with the rest of the group and on solid, horizontal ground. This is where they live. This is real life now... real life with all its monotony, problems, temptations and struggles... but also joys and friendships, family and victories... this is life! It's just that this life is so **hard** when you've just been on the mountain!

On top of the mountain the disciples felt special, privileged, encouraged and strengthened... they must have felt invincible. They, the chosen three, saw Moses, Elijah and God! So when in v. 14 they run into a man who has a bit of a spiritual situation (OK, admittedly a pretty big one – his son was demon-possessed) I'm sure the disciples thought – this is going to be easy! We have just hiked with Jesus... up a mountain... and down... we got this!

But in the end we discover that they haven't got this at all. The disciples had tried to free this young man from the demon but they couldn't do it... so his father comes to the One person he knows that can. So Jesus is back in the centre (where he should always be) and he takes over. And with one word Jesus casts out the demon, the boy is healed and the people are amazed! The day goes on, the crowd hangs around waiting to hear more and to get more... but I'm sure the disciples keep thinking about that young man and their failure. *“Why couldn't we save that boy? Why couldn't we cast out that demon? We are Jesus' disciples... all of us! Three of us hiked with Jesus while the rest of us cast out demons, preached and*

taught. But that kid and his dad... we couldn't help! On the mountain we were invincible, but down here we are mere mortals, failures... every last one of us".

So later (v. 19), in private... because these things are embarrassing... they ask Jesus about what happened. *Why? What went wrong? What did we do wrong?*

Jesus' answer was a shock. *"Because you don't have enough faith (in Mark and Luke Jesus also tells them that they didn't pray)".* After all they had seen, after all they had experienced –they had simply assumed that they could invoke Jesus' power when they pleased. Jesus wasn't in the centre... he wasn't even invited to be present. And their faith... oh they had some, it was just very weak! Sure, it might have been strong enough to see the big things that God provided for them – like the transfiguration, but it was too small for the mundane issues of life. But that is exactly where they needed to have the most faith!

Having faith is tough and it's even more difficult to live it out and allow it to grow! And if you have the guts to hike with Jesus, you will find it tested and pushed and stretched as you make your journey. There are 4 places where your faith will be tested... those 4 places are the same places where a hiker must go if she wants to reach the summit.

1. **The climb up.** The climb up is hard work. You need to have enough faith in yourself and in the journey to keep going. Going up you will discover exactly how out of shape you really are... physically or spiritually. In order to reach the summit you must fight off the temptation to quit and never reach the top. You must resist the desire to take long pauses. You must not allow yourself to get distracted by the beauty around which may look very nice... It gets very easy to become satisfied with where you're at and drop out of the climb. If this happens on your journey with Jesus you will never reach the place that He has planned for you.
2. **The summit.** The summit is so cool! You feel like you're on top of the world. You still feel the ache in your legs, your breathing is still heavy but you suddenly feel energized... like you could climb 5 more mountains before the day is over. Spiritually, these are camps, congresses, church retreats, youth gatherings... anywhere where you feel like "this is it!" I love the summit but

I also know that I can't stay up there forever. I don't actually grow or develop my skills on the summit... rather I get inspired at the top. But there comes a time when you and I must start the trip back down.

3. **The long walk down.** The journey off the mountain is often more dangerous than the journey up. You are now hours into the hike and although you may feel elated you are also tired and being tired often leads to making mistakes... and they can be costly! Walking down the mountain takes a lot of faith mostly because you know what you leaving behind and you know what you are going back down to. You must face the same temptations you faced on your journey up... only this time, there's no excitement of the summit to keep you moving. You risk injury by going too quickly and getting out of control. And if you go too slow...you risk walking in the dark. Neither situation is one that you want to be in. The walk down is a steady, one foot in front of the other journey. Watch for hazards on the path, keep hydrated and allow yourself to reflect on what you saw at the summit. Before too long...
4. **You're back at the base, back on flat ground.** When we read the gospels we find that Jesus had very few "mountain top experiences". We mostly find Jesus in the villages and cities, in the middle of crowds, having meals, going to parties, talking with those who were lonely, healing the sick, and touching the untouchables, teaching those who wanted to learn and confronting those who didn't. This is where we live and this is where people still need us; where they need the Church the most. They don't need our big congresses or worship nights, they don't need our camps or youth programs. They need us in the daily grind of everyday living, where finances are limited and children get sick; where people don't trust each other and are prisoners to their fear. They need us when they flee from the lives they once knew and understood to try and find a safe place for their children to grow up. They need us where there is suffering, and abuse, and abandonment. This where we live most often and where are our faith is pushed to its limits. When we do our shopping, as we travel to and from work, as we're at work, as we stand in lines, go the cinema and sit on the beach. It is in all of these places that the world needs to see and feel our

living faith! They need to see hope and kindness, love and gentleness; they need to see the power that come from an unquenchable source of faith in Jesus Christ who defeated death and rose victorious and who again lives in glorified perfection. This is life! This is where we live.

You know, in all four of those places... Jesus is with us. Jesus didn't meet Peter, James and John on top of the mountain and he didn't suddenly appear with them at the bottom. Jesus walked up the mountain with them, shared the summit experience with them, walked with them back down and carried on in life with them.

Jesus invites us to walk this journey with him each step of the way. As we walk up the mountain He's the one urging us to take another step, to not give up, to not turn back but to dream and imagine the summit.

And there he's with us again, right at the summit, showing us what we can be and how good things can look. At the summit he allows us to rest with him, slow down and enjoy His presence. Often times He whispers His dreams for us in these moments. Sometimes we can barely hear them but we can a quick glimpse of what our lives could be... and its great!

But then he reminds us that we must go down and live our lives where He has placed us. For some of us, Jesus walks down beside us and helps us understand what we learned on the journey up and at the summit. For others He goes slightly ahead and prepares the path, making sure that dangers are out of the way. Still for others, or maybe for all of us at some part of our journey, Jesus does what I did with my cousin... step by step He works with us through our fears, He helps us over the dangerous scary parts, He lets us crash into him when we need to. He is never far away, He is never distracted, His goal is to get us down safely.

And there is He again, right beside us on the ground living with us, in us and through us as we go through life; making decisions, changing jobs, getting married, having children, doing His work, living and dying... always... Jesus is there.

Will we make mistakes? Yes! Will we fail? Probably! Will Jesus give up on us? Never! Jesus didn't give up on the disciples... he just asked them to keep walking, to keep working on their faith, to keep trying to understand who He was and what He came to do. That's what Jesus asks of us as well. Missional living, transformational living, being disciples who thrive is about staying on the journey with Jesus no matter where you are on that journey. If you are on top of the mountain – rejoice, enjoy it... but remember sooner rather than later, you need to come down! If you are climbing up or crawling down... don't give up. Let Jesus teach you what you need to learn for the next stage... just keep moving. And if you're at the bottom and living in the daily grind, don't stop. Put everything that you learned, saw and experienced into action. Encourage those who are tired, feed those who are hungry, share hope with those who are desperate, give money to those who are needy, work ethically where there are no ethics at all, raise your children and love your spouse where families are falling apart. Do it all with Jesus in the middle of your heart, your thoughts, your decisions... your life.

One last observation about hiking and being a disciple – never do them alone! It's the cardinal rule of hiking. Never hike alone! Always hike in groups. The reasons for that are many and obvious. The same thing about being disciples. Never do it alone! While our decision to follow Jesus is individual, our walk with him is communal. Walk together. Join a church; join together as youth; build strong networks of support and encouragement... and even a little bit of exhortation and correction.

I'd like to leave you with one last challenge: It's an old challenge, maybe you've heard of it. It's called it the 86 400 challenge! Imagine that one morning you hear the doorbell ring. You open the door and you are greeted with balloons, streamers, champagne and someone holding a massive cheque! An \$86 400 cheque!! It's all yours! Someone explains to you that this is just the beginning... this is today's cheque! You can expect the same cheque to arrive every single day for the rest of your life... but there are rules!

You must use your 86 400€ every single day... if you don't spend the money then you lose it. You cannot save it or put it in a bank. You cannot transfer your money

or give it to anyone else. You can spend your money on other people... or on yourself... but you must spend it!

What will you do? How will you spend your money? Will you buy the things you've always dreamed of having? Will you buy bigger and better? Will you be generous and spend it on others? Who will you ask to help you, to guide you? Or do you think you can spend that money wisely on your own?

The reality is... this challenge will likely never ever happen! I doubt anyone will offer any of us \$86 400/day. But what you and I are offered every day is 86 400 **seconds**... 24 hours, every day! We must spend those seconds... and we can't store them up and we can't give them to other people. We can use them for and with other people, or we can waste them. Who is invited to help us? Who will have a say in how we spend our time and our energy; our gifts and our passions; our resources and careers? How you answer that will determine if you will live your life as a believer of Jesus... or as his disciple... and there is a great difference!

My dream for us as disciples who thrive, is that we walk together, in faith, every day and in all ways; that we are unified and take this journey together by laying down our little differences and disagreements and decide that Jesus is more important. I dream that we will not be Sunday Christians only with the futile thinking that Monday-Saturday doesn't really matter very much to God. That we stop thinking that Christian living happens in buildings with doors. I dream that we live without fear but with more faith and hope. I dream that we not only to talk about love (and we need to talk about it) but we also need to show it. I dream that we live less committed to comfort and more committed to the cost.

Will you and I take up the call from Hebrews 12:1-2 – *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*"