The farmer is not in the least bit impressed by the grandeur of the mountain. We are left to wonder if he even considers the mountain grand at all. To the farmer, the mountain is just the thing "That thing takes all the room." He would not think of exploring it; considering it a waste of effort to climb it for the sake of climbing.

This ordinary conversation between two people somehow manages to traffic in the profound as the traveler reflects: “It doesn’t seem so much to climb a mountain you’ve worked around the foot of all your life.” It feels somehow very sad that this farmer spends his entire life staring up at the mountain’s looming form, but never once ventures to the summit. All he knew about the mountain and about the spring near the top, he learned secondhand. The mountain and the brook were there all along; he could have set out upon the upward trail, but somehow never did.

Which brings me to my point: when it comes to our knowledge of God, we are a lot like that farmer. Many of us are simply not that curious about God, so we do not spend much time or effort seeking God out. And much of what we know about God depends on hearsay, not firsthand experience. If someone were to stop any one of us and ask what it is like to have a “mountaintop experience,” a genuine experience with God, would we be able to share anything meaningful?

Jesus’ disciples Peter, James and John might have had a hard time answering that question, too, until they followed Jesus up the side of the mountain, huffing and puffing all the way to the summit. At the top, they saw something wholly unexpected: not a bubbling spring, but Jesus “transfigured” before them. When that brief experience ended, they knew their lives would never be the same.

“[Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with [Jesus]” (Matthew 17:2-3). Not only is their master’s appearance transfigured (transformed into something more beautiful or elevated), but Jesus also gets a double celebrity endorsement with the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of Israel!

It is a lot for the disciples to take in; and at first, they misunderstand what is happening. Peter says: “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Matthew 17:4). Impulsive Peter, who is like so many of us, overworking, over-functioning, barely taking a second to stop, catch a breath and behold the wonder unfolding before his very eyes!

Some moments are simply meant to be savored for what they are, not preserved for posterity. Have you ever been to a tourist spot where people are taking pictures and videos with their smartphones? They are so desperate to capture what they see that they barely even see it, not firsthand, anyway. It is like standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, or at the base of the Eiffel Tower, or gazing up at Mount Everest but only seeing it through that tiny screen. What a waste! Come on, Peter, forget the shelters. Stop *doing*, and concentrate on being, on gratefully receiving the wonder which is before your eyes!

Where are the mountaintops in our lives? Where do earthbound folk like us stand a better-than-average chance of encountering the living God? No one can dictate where God is going to show up; the spirit-wind “blows where it chooses,” Jesus taught Nicodemus (John 3:8). And yet, there are certain things we can do to position ourselves in the right place at the right time. Today, at the threshold of Lent, it is a good time to think about these things because of the various practices we can choose to adopt as part of our Lenten discipline.

For starters, we can **pray**. Not a hurried grace before dinner, or a sleepy-eyed bedtime prayer, or the swift request beamed to God in a moment of panic. The way to truly ascend the mountain in prayer is to practice a patient, contemplative kind of prayer; a more watchful waiting than conscious thought, more silence than speech.

Another way of ascending the mountain spiritually is to **read scripture**. Again, this requires dedicated time, not a few seconds amid the frantic multitasking of our days. There are ways of reading carefully chosen Bible passages devotionally, ways that allow us as readers to brood over the text, attuned to what God the Holy Spirit is trying to say to us.

Another way of opening ourselves to God’s presence is by **attending worship regularly**. You cannot count on sensing the presence of the Lord in worship every Sunday, but being in the presence of other worshipping Christians helps to put our heart and mind in the right frame to receive God. Think of the young Isaiah, worshiping in the Temple, when he had a vision of an angel holding the burning coal, and of God saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8).

Lastly, we can **add something** for Lent. Many traditions challenge the faithful to give up something for Lent, deleting a bad habit or eliminating the clutter from our spiritual lives. This can be good practice during Lent, but I prefer to add things during Lent. How about adding a few more hours of community service? How about adding more time with family? How about adding a few more dollars to a donation? How about adding in a weekly lunch with a friend? Adding positive, affirming, and life-giving things to your day, helps move you closer to a God-inspired way of living.

Through prayer, scripture reading, worship, and adding positive things — ordinary spiritual disciplines — we can ascend the spiritual mountain. We can open our hearts to whatever God is ready to do with us. I say again, no one can summon the Holy Spirit at will. You cannot *make* yourself have a spiritual experience. Only God can see to that. Yet, to adapt a state lottery slogan to a more sacred purpose, “you can’t win if you don’t play.” If you position yourself properly, God just might show up!

It is always a sad thing when a mountain remains unclimbed. Like the farmer in Robert Frost’s poem, the mountain is always there, looming up familiar and serene, but its summit never attempted. Is there a spring at the top, or isn’t there? Will the Lord appear, shining brightly as the sun or must the waiting continue? Who can know? But you can only find out for sure by climbing!

Matthew 17:8 says, “when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” It is easily overlooked after the wonder of the dazzling figures and the strangeness of the glowing cloud. At first glance it seems like such an ordinary transition from the miraculous back to the everyday’ but it is more than that. Think of what it means to “see no one except Jesus himself alone.” We are at our best, spiritually, when we can do just that!

An old gospel song says: “Keep your eyes on Jesus / When the tidal waves of trouble ’round you roll / Keep your eyes on Jesus / He will calm the storms of life that cost your soul.” Maybe the greatest wonder of the transfiguration story is not the bedazzling vision. It just may be our realization that, when everything is said and done, Jesus is still there: for us.

The season of Lent provides many opportunities for spiritual mountain-climbing. We do not need a rocket to catapult us up to the proper vantage-point; we just need to walk, slowly and steadily, up the side of the mountain looming over us all our lives. We do not need the lung-bursting strength and endurance of an athlete to do it; we just need persistence, and the willingness to set aside the time needed to make the ascent. Take as much time as you need; the mountain will still be there.

Those 40 days of Lent can be a scarcely noticed string of dates on the calendar, or they can be a season of true spiritual growth. The choice is up to each one of us. “It may not seem so much to climb a mountain you’ve worked around the foot of all your life,” as the poet says. But one thing is for sure: If you never begin to climb, you will never know the glories of the summit.

Prayer: Almighty and ever living God, you invite us deeper into your world, your people, your Lent. May this time be one of outward focus; seeking you in those we often ignore. Help us live a Lent focused on freedom, generosity, and encounter. Give us hearts hungry to serve you and those who need what we have to give. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**Source:** Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (Henry Holt and Company, 1915).

**Unclimbed Mountains**

Sunday, February 19, 2023 [Matthew 17:1-9](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+17%3a1-9&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“The Mountain”1 is a poem by Robert Frost. It is a long dialogue between two people: a traveler and a farmer. The traveler stands in awe of the mountain, curious, wondering what lies beyond it. The farmer, on the other hand, sees the mountain as a barrier that hinders travel and the expansion of the town, and he has no interest at all in exploring it. The traveler asks him: “You’ve never climbed it?” The farmer answers:

“I’ve been on the sides Deer-hunting and trout-fishing.

There’s a brook That starts up on it somewhere — I’ve heard say

Right on the top, tip-top — a curious thing.

But what would interest you about the brook,

It’s always cold in summer, warm in winter.

To which the traveler presses the farmer:

“There ought to be a view around the world

From such a mountain — if it isn’t wooded

Clear to the top.” I saw through leafy screens

Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,

Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up —

With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet;

Or turn and sit on and look out and down,

With little ferns in crevices at his elbow.

The farmer responds: “As to that I can’t say. But there’s the spring, right on the summit, almost like a fountain. That ought to be worth seeing.”

The traveler, astonished, asks: “If it’s there. You never saw it?” The farmer admits:

“I guess there’s no doubt About its being there. I never saw it.

It may not be right on the very top:

It wouldn’t have to be a long way down

To have some head of water from above,

And a good distance down might not be noticed

By anyone who’d come a long way up.

One time I asked a fellow climbing it

To look and tell me later how it was.”