

**Visions from the Grand Canyon: A Hiking Faith
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
11 September 2005
Text: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-53**

Life, opined writer Flannery O'Connor, is mingled meaning and mystery. We learn of meaning by study, through experience and relationship, within a tradition and in that rare and startling moment of insight. But sometimes the mystery of life is so great that it obscures meaning. We can't penetrate what the ancients called the cloud of unknowing. We can see only its shadow, or catch a glimpse in the moment when the clouds part, if only for a while. You know those moments, and how often they are precipitated by a crisis, a crossroad, a turning point. How often do they come by way of encounter with the stranger, through travel in unfamiliar territory. But the meaning uncovered in those moments cannot always be named or neatly explained, and for that we have metaphor.

Hiking down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon – and back out!--this summer became, for me, a metaphor; a way to describe what is at times indescribable: a journey of faith, a connection with God, the life of the spirit. These sermons are an interpretation—an attempt to translate the experience into language that might, by the grace of God, illuminate some meaning in the mystery of our personal journeys, and of our journey together as Fairmount Presbyterian Church. One of you asked me if they were going to be travelogues, and I guess they are, if you're thinking in the spiritual realm and about the landscape of faith.

The Grand Canyon adventure began in the mind of Fairmount elder Carol Fisher, as a way of marking her birthday (the one that starts with "f" and isn't 40). She invited five women, including Fairmounter Jackie Collesi and me, and more than a year ago we began to make plans and secure reservations.

Why the Grand Canyon? Well, Carol grew up in Arizona and had thrilled to canyon vistas *from the rim*. But she'd always been curious about what *hiking* the canyon might be like. I was only too happy to join her, figuring that this might provide the kind of semi-dangerous, yet heady feat that could make me laugh in the face of fifty.

The biblical writers certainly had loftier purpose in their thoughtful accounts of Jesus' life and earthly ministry, but they had no less difficulty in finding words to describe the meaning of it. Time and again you sense the limits of their ability to write about Divine presence and power. Jesus himself used metaphor often: I am the light of the world; I am the bread of life; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the Way, the truth and the life. Additionally Jesus most always used metaphor when proclaiming the Kingdom of God. In today's gospel reading Jesus uses a variety of these word pictures—a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure hidden in a field, a fine pearl, a fishing net—to tell the truth about the rule of God on earth as it is in heaven. Along with these rich examples, I offer another: The Kingdom of God is like the Grand Canyon... .. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew in the thirteenth chapter, at the 31st verse (found on p. of the chapel/pew Bibles). [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-53]

The Sunday morning we were at the south rim of the canyon dawned as if on the first day of creation. The sun filled the vast space with pure light, a lone cloud's lazy saunter overhead creating shadows that sculpted the canyon anew, revealing its multicolored layers. Surveying the breathtaking panorama, Carol whispered reverently, "Beats church."

Now Carol is a faithful elder, an active leader and a nice person who immediately felt bad about comparing her church unfavorably to one of the seven natural wonders of the world. But she has a point – at least as we often envision church as a spectator sport, from a pew-potato perspective. What I think she was expressing is the feeling of transcendence we all experienced there.

Words such as “immensity,” “infinity” “awe” filled our conversation to describe what was continually before our eyes. The views themselves awakened a spiritual sense dulled by daily cares and routines. God, it seemed to us, was unquestionably real and accessible there.

Not all canyon-viewers have felt that way. The first white people to see the canyon were members of the Coronado expedition in 1540. Hungry for the fabled gold of this land, the explorers considered the canyon only an enormous obstacle making their trek more difficult. A lieutenant from the Army Corps of Engineers sent in 1857 to scout out possible routes in and out of the canyon concluded that it had no commercial value; it was, he said, a dismal abyss. And the Rev. C.B. Spencer writing after his time there around 1900 was even less restrained in his assessment: “Horror! Tragedy! Silence! Death! Chaos! There is the awful canyon in five words.” [*from Grand Canyon Visual, by John Hoffman. Western Recreational Publications, 1987*]

I guess that’s how it is with the Kingdom of God: it’s not immediately apparent to everyone in quite the same way. There’s a hidden aspect to it. It has the potential of a seed; the secret power of yeast; the unknown worth of buried treasure; the promise of unwalked trails. And so we hiked them. Seven miles down the South Kaibab trail, where there is no water and precious little shade. A full day at the bottom, at Phantom Ranch, and a short easy walk to explore Bright Angel canyon and falls. Then in the pre-dawn hours of the next day, we began the 10 mile hike up Bright Angel trail. The initial part of the trail is easy, a gradual grade, crossing and then paralleling the mighty Colorado River. The first real challenge comes at what’s called the “Devil’s Corkscrew”—a series of short, steep switchbacks that zip you up and out of the inner gorge to Indian Garden campground, about halfway to the rim. After lunch and a rest in the heat of the day, we headed onward and upward.

Theoretically the trek could now be divided into three segments of a mile and a half each, with the reward of water and a shady rest area at the end of each segment. I say theoretically because they are the longest one and a half miles you can imagine. This last stretch is unbelievably steep, and at times making the incline leaves you gasping for breath. It's hot too, and by this point you're tired, your feet feeling like lead weights. Meanwhile, the rim still looks impossibly far off. But little by little, with frequent rests and watering breaks and devouring those electrolyte-replacing salty snacks, step by step we made it—all six of us middle-aged women—to the top. And what an adrenalin rush that was! There is nothing quite so satisfying as accomplishing something outside your comfort zone, of being stretched beyond your normal capabilities and finding that you can do it. Hard as the hiking was at times, it was fun and restorative and joyous, partly for that very reason. Maybe that's what the poet Robert Browning had in mind when he wrote, "A man's reach must exceed his grasp, else what's a heaven for?"

Grand Canyon veterans will tell you "If you haven't HIKED the canyon you haven't SEEN the canyon." While I wouldn't dismiss the rim views out of hand like that, I think I understand better what the old-timers mean. You will see more—and the visions will come from different perspectives—if you get off the bench at the scenic lookout and hit the trail.

Friends, the journey to the Kingdom of God is...well, not so different from a hike in the Grand Canyon. It is a path that will demand the very best of you. It will take you far beyond your comfort zone and the comforts of home. It's a journey, and if the mystery of the destination is not entirely resolved, it will most definitely take you closer to the edge, deeper into the eternal, and nearer to the heart of God. A hiking faith stands in sharp contrast to the air-conditioned, paved, internal combustion-driven ways we contemporary people get around.

The spiritual hunger of a soul for God gets suppressed sometimes by the busy-ness with which we fill our lives; a pace that won't allow for reflection on the purpose of it all; the still small voice drowned out by the roar of competing loyalties. On the other hand, a canyon hike is marked by a quiet so immense you find yourself whispering in respect. The pace is slow, one step at a time, with plenty of opportunities to stop and breathe deeply, re-focus and march on. Almost no one rushes, because the destination isn't the most important goal; the hike itself is an inspiration, a walk of unparalleled beauty, a purposive journey to be savored with companions both human and divine.

The Guide to the Grand Canyon, published by the National Park Service, offers indispensable suggestions that apply equally well to canyon hikes or journeys of faith. First, *stay cool*. Immerse yourself in water as you begin to walk, and keep your shirt and hat wet. The Christian faith journey begins in water, as baptism sets us on the path. We walk best when we continue to drink deeply from the living water Jesus gives. *Prepare for the trip*. Read the guidebook, listen to the experts, show up for practice. The learning doesn't end with confirmation. Check out the engaging adult education classes, Bible study, and small group experiences offered by Fairmount this Fall that can enhance your hike immeasurably. *Rest often*. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Making a commitment to worship once a week provides the break in our lives we need for renewal and to give us the stamina to persevere. And finally, *eat and drink frequently*. The bread of life and the cup of salvation provide nourishment that simply can't be found anywhere else. Our own resources—not matter how considerable-- are not adequate for the rigors of the journey; in God we are strengthened and sustained for every switchback, every rocky patch, every tear whether it be of sorrow or joy. In short, we will be more alive. As G.K. Chesterton observed, "The world will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder."

So come on! The Christian life is an invitation to hike. Yes, it will be an arduous walk, requiring training and discipline and practice. But what an adventure! Follow me, Jesus beckons each one of us. Walk awhile, explore, question, examine, consider. If you haven't hiked the faith, you haven't seen the faith. In two weeks we will celebrate "Invite Your Friends" Sunday. What a perfect time to invite your friends and neighbors to the hike of a lifetime.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE IN
GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE
POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

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