

**Visions from the Grand Canyon: Keeping Faith Together**  
**A sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**25 September 2005**  
**Text: John 1:43-51**

The photograph on the poster was of a good-looking man, twenty-something and obviously in good shape....which made the caption even more riveting: *250 medical evacuations occur in the Grand Canyon annually--most of them look like this.* It seems the majority of medical emergencies in the canyon involve strong, young men who believe they can make it on their own, striding the trail under their own power, completely confident of their ability to get to the top. But hiking in the Grand Canyon is strenuous. The heat can cause dehydration more quickly than you might imagine. The trail we took out of the canyon was 10 miles long and ascended a vertical mile. Experienced hikers will tell you not to go it alone. Take a buddy. Don't attempt to hike down and out in a single day. Take your time, rest often, and eat and drink. At the trailhead, however, captivated by the grandeur and exquisite beauty of all you see before you, it's impossible to imagine what's in store and what will be required of you.

In this series of sermons which concludes today, I've envisioned hiking the Grand Canyon as a quest for God, the human hunger for connection with the divine. It's the story of our lives and how we answer the big questions such as Who am I? Why am I here? How can I know God? While such questions are intensely personal, spiritual as well as practical insight suggest that they are best addressed in community. Don't hike alone! The journey of faith is not so much a lone pilgrimage, but a path undertaken with companions. A saying from Senegal expresses it well: *If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go with others.* Some people think spirituality is largely a private matter, something to

figure out in your own soul and conscience. But many have also discovered that individual effort is not adequate in the face of strenuous life challenges. When the path ahead is obscured, or when it forks, they are uncertain which direction to go. Many more have filled their lives with work and home and family and play, yet come out wondering if they have missed something essential.

Don't hike alone. Jesus didn't. Almost the first thing he did as he began his earthly ministry was to gather a group of people around him, men and women with whom he traveled, conversed, sang and prayed, and whom he deeply loved. The morning gospel reading chronicles the call of two of Jesus' disciples. It's a window on how we start to answer the question about knowing God. It's a story about friendship and friendly persuasion. It's about an invitation to "come and see," to get in the game, or—sticking with the metaphor, to hit the trail together. Listen for God's word to you in the reading found on page 92 of the chapel/pew Bibles; from the gospel according to John in the first chapter at the 43<sup>rd</sup> verse. [JOHN 1:43-51]

I heard about a minister who preached a sermon on sin in which he said there were at least seven hundred eighty-six different varieties. In his e-mail the next day, he had 55 requests for the list. Maybe there is a downside to too much information! The role of the church, it seems to me, is not so much to explain God to the people, but to gather people to consider how God explains life. The Church invites, not dictates. What you will find here is not a "laundry list" of faith but an invitation to explore faith. Come and see what God has done and what God is doing.

And just see how this invitation brings people together. In our text, Philip can't wait to tell his friend Nathanael about the teacher who demonstrates such insight and compassion. He goes looking for him and enthusiastically shares his experience. Nathanael is, shall we say, *underwhelmed*.

Oh my, such a backwater little town. Can't expect much from those people. Who did you say his father was? Hmmpf—never heard of him. What a friend Philip was, not to be dissuaded by Nathanael's initial resistance. He didn't lecture; he didn't beg. Instead he invited his friend to check the news out for himself. *Come and see*. Maybe Nathanael got out from under his fig tree and walked toward Jesus primarily on the force of his friend's recommendation. Maybe he would never have been introduced to Jesus had it not been for Philip's invitation. And even Philip could not have imagined all that lay in store for them as they followed Jesus. Jesus hinted at what it would be like by referring to a centuries-old story told of the patriarch Jacob. When he was fleeing for his life and from the consequences of his betrayal of his own brother, he slept in the wilderness and had a fantastic dream with a ladder stretched between heaven and earth and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. The vision galvanized Jacob and set him on a path that produced reconciliation and hope.

The church is Philip's successor, inviting contemporary people on a journey of discovery beyond all imagining. Thankfully we don't have to invent or re-invent God; we don't have to defend God or justify God. We can trust God to do what God does and to be who God is. Our role is simply—simply!—to point the way, inviting others again and again to “come and see.” We have a conviction that faith is kept best together. The more it is shared, the more we have.

The journey itself is different for different people. The six women who hiked the Grand Canyon this summer had varying degrees of fitness, differing abilities to withstand heat, and a range of walking paces. We made a decision at the beginning that we would stick together no matter what, and that made all the difference. When one of us tired, the others stopped and rested too. When spirits flagged, we encouraged each other. We reminded each other to eat salty snacks and drink water. We also told jokes, sang silly songs, and called attention to the amazing sights all along the way. The hike out of the canyon took 12 hours, which would have been daunting--- perhaps even impossible---had it been undertaken alone. As it was, when we reached the rim to hugs and high-fives, we said as one, “When can we do this again?!”

The journey of faith, like a hike in the canyon, is best undertaken together. It makes sense—the word “religion” itself is drawn from the same Latin root as “ligament”, a thing that ties or unites one thing to another. We were created for community, and without it we are adrift, blown about by every wind of fortune or fate. The first church I served as pastor was in rural Iowa. I remember early on trying to visit a church member and getting hopelessly turned around on those unmarked country roads, and finally pulling into a little gas station out in the middle of nowhere. I ran in and sort of breathlessly announced that I was lost. The old man behind the counter smiled and answered, “Naw, you're not lost. You're with us. Now where is it that you want to go?”

Friends, you're not lost when you are in the company of God's people. Instead, you'll find fuel and friends and a way to go.

And something more. This week I read an op ed piece in the Plain Dealer by one of the regular columnists, a curmudgeonly old fellow whose work I generally admire. He was bemoaning the same old, same old; how life seems to be the same stale handful of plots, endlessly repeated. We keep doing the same things over and over, to little or no effect. We keep making the same mistakes rather than learning from them and changing. “Trudging along on a treadmill” was the way he put it. I was moved to respond. Not because what he wrote wasn't accurate—there are heartbreaking human tragedies of war, poverty, despair that seem

resistant to human solution. But I don't buy the treadmill image, and I don't for only one reason: the community of faith of which I am part believes that God is still at work, making peace, establishing justice, setting captives free, reconciling people, healing hurts. When my own faith grows dim, the church is there to remind me. When my strength seems woefully inadequate, the church is there to renew and restore me with the strength of others. When I come to the limits of my ability to love, the church keeps on loving. In the face of intransigent problems, the church relies on the promise of its Lord: *Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* We're not trudging along on a treadmill; we're hiking a grand trail with a vast array of breathtaking vistas in the company of friends. You mediate God's grace; you put a face on the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ. Keeping faith together, we become bearers of hope.

So don't hike alone! A community of faith like Fairmount can be a good place to train for the adventure of a lifetime. Here are companions who have your back, who will support you in doubt and difficulty, who will challenge you to discern your own life's purpose and God's particular call to you. Come and see, whether for the first or five hundredth time. Worship is a good place to start, but also check out the small group experiences we offer, designed to build community and form and re-form faith. Join us in significant hands-on mission, whether offering hospitality to homeless persons, mentoring young people, constructing homes, advocating for justice in our metropolitan community. Come and see for yourself. Invite others to come and see. Jesus' words to Nathanael echo across the millennia: You will see greater things than these. You will discover more than you ever dreamed. Follow me.

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

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