

Come on down: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

In punishment for my sins, my HMO assigned me to a fundamentalist Baptist doctor who subjects me to theological conversation while he examines me. During the poking and prodding he'll say, for example, "I don't know how you preachers do it—the politics, the congregational complaining, the expectations of the people. I take my hat off to you pastors."

Though I was not in the best posture for a defense of the ministry, I said, "Speaking of demeaning ways to earn a living—I'm thinking that my worst moment in the parish is not as bad as what you're doing now."

Still, he had a point. The pastoral ministry is a tough vocation. Something like 300 Southern Baptist pastors are fired every month. Yet in my experience, most of us pastors are not interesting enough to get fired. We get depressed. Like the disciples with Jesus, we get "heavy with sleep" sometime between seminary and retirement; our eyes grow heavy, the originating vision becomes blurred, we doze off in mid-conversation, burn out, black out, brown out. When I asked Stanley Hauerwas about the main ethical challenge for us pastors, he replied, "Don't flatter yourselves. It's not sex. It's constancy."

How, in God's name, do we keep at it?

Jesus leads his disciples up a mountain. He was forever making them go places with him that nobody much wanted to go. But this was different. Mountains are good, quiet, restorative places for Sabbath retreat, rest and renewal. The pace had been hectic, so they headed for the hills. There's a man in my congregation who does this—he goes to Alaska two weeks every year to be alone and "find himself."

But on the mountain everything changes. The disciples' solitude is intruded upon by the dead. If Peter hoped to "find himself," forget it. He is discovered by the two great figures of the faith—Moses and Elijah. There is stunning, transfiguring vision and inspired speech. Peter, jolted awake, listens in on the conversation between Jesus and the patriarchs.

This is Christian worship as good as it gets. In fact, take this encounter as a description of what we want at every service—talk to the dead, conversation that is law-prophet-gospel determined, vision and response. We, who do so much talking, fall silent, recipients of revelation. The baptismal voice (Luke 3:22) again speaks through the parted curtains of eternity, just in case we missed the first time, “This is my Son, my Chosen, hear him!” Luke specializes in subtlety, allusion, story and inference, so it’s great to hear these lines, which are direct, indicative and imperative.

Peter blurts out, “Let’s stay here forever! Can’t we go past noon, just this one Sunday?”

It’s an understandable wish. Forget the building program. Shut off the conversations, turn off the lights and be with “Jesus only.” But revelation is a gift, not a possession.

Maybe this is the apex of worship, when other, competing, rival claims and subsidiary visions dissipate and we are left alone, naked, poorly defended, just Jesus and us. We rise, we go forth, back down to the valley where there are sick to be healed, crosses to be borne, the dead to be raised, the budget to be met—the usual church stuff. Like Moses, having seen and listened to God, we trudge back down the mountain only to find the congregation cavorting around a golden calf (Exod. 32). It’s what they always do once the preacher’s back is turned. It’s depressing.

A major clergy killer is this gap between our momentary but stirring mountaintop visions of the kingdom of God and the grubby sociological reality of the church in the valley. How do we keep at it?

Moses returned to the people with his face all aglow. He looked like the sun, some said, huge rays of light bursting from his brain, his whole countenance changed, having been alone on the mountain with God without adequate protection. It was enough to keep him on the journey.

A few weeks ago I had a bad day, the culmination of a bad week. The congregation didn’t like my sermon, didn’t care for my pastoral care. The Institute on Religion and Democracy sent another batch of spiteful e-mails. The electrical relay to the organ gave out. I was depressed.

Then, preparing for a sermon, reading a text I had worked on many times before—Galatians 2—I noticed something. A little Greek word, *eis*. Paul says “a

person is righteous not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” But *eis* can be either translated “in” or “of.” Is it the faith “in” Jesus Christ—Jesus is the object of our faith? Or can it also be the faith “of” Jesus Christ—we are to have the same faith, that same suffering, obedient unto death, boldly trusting faith? Suddenly the latter possibility glowed before me, lit up my imagination, transfigured my previous understandings of faith. Our being right with God is not so much our belief in Christ as it is our believing like Christ. What matters is Jesus, moving toward the world as he moved, living and believing as Jesus, “Jesus only.”

I wanted to preserve that moment of exegetical insight forever. But I couldn't. I had to go back down and be a pastor, answer the mail, visit the sick and construct a sermon.

Still, my face shone because, like Moses, I had been talking with God. The rest of that day some people needed sunglasses just to look at me.