

2-28-2010 Homily by Father Larry Covington
Second Sunday in Lent Cycle C

A few years back, I read Bill Bryson's book *A Walk in the Woods*, a wonderfully funny story about the author's attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail. Early in the book Bryson described his first day of hiking, which began on the gently sloping access trails that lead to the trailhead on Springer Mountain in north Georgia and then on toward an ultimate destination some 2,100 miles away on Mt. Katahdin in Maine. Despite all his excitement and all his planning and all his preparation, Bryson said that the first day on the trail was simply awful: Listen as he writes:

First days on hiking trips are always bad. I was hopelessly out of shape----hopelessly. The pack weighed way too much, Way too much. I had never encountered anything so hard, for which I was so ill prepared. Every step was a struggle.

The hardest part was coming to terms with the constant discovery that there was always more hill. The thing about being on a hill as opposed to standing back from it is that you can almost never see

what's to come. Between the curtain of trees at every side, the ever receding contour of rising slope before you, and your own plodding weariness, you gradually lose track of how far you have come. Each time you haul yourself up to what you think must be the crest, you find that there is in fact more hill beyond, sloped at an angle that kept it from view before, and that beyond that slope is another, and another, and another, and beyond each of those more still, until it seems impossible that any hill could run on this long. Eventually you reach a height where you can see the tops of the topmost trees, with nothing but clear sky beyond, and your faltering spirits stir----nearly there now!----but this is a pitiless deception. The elusive summit continually retreats by whatever distance you press forward, so that each time the canopy parts enough to give you a view you are dismayed to see that the topmost trees are as remote, as unattainable, as before. Still you stagger on. What else can you do?

If I hadn't known that Bryson was describing a hike on the Appalachian Trail, I might have thought she was describing

metaphorically the journey of human life or of human faith....at least the kinds of life and faith journeys many of us have experienced. When we were young, our lives may seem most of the time like level paths, smooth going with scarcely a tree root or an icy patch to trip us up. But as we get older and the plots of our lives thicken and the trek gets more and more complex, our lives and our faith are more often defined by the hills we must climb, the sweeping slopes upward, the steep and rocky mountain paths, all fraught with perils and pitfalls.. There are times in such hikes when not only reaching our destination, but even our survival is n question. In our advanced years, the climbs may seem relentless, wearying. We may find it easy to ignore God in the flatlands where everything is smooth and we are betrayed by our own progress into illusions of self-sufficiency. When the paths get steep and treacherous, in anxiety and fear we are more likely to cry out to God. Ultimately, in those times when we do reach the summit, when we do come to the end of an arduous and frightening journey, or at least to a plateau or resting place, there, there is

where we may catch a glimpse of grace and even glory...there,
where we may experience profound gratitude.

It's no wonder that when one does finally reach the high ground,
one wants to stay. That was surely the case with Peter. Having
reached the summit---not just the top of the mountain, but a
profound experience of holiness and mystery and glory---he didn't
want to leave. He wanted to stay, to freeze the moment in time.

There have been many writers who understand the metaphor of the
mountain in our spiritual journeys. After all what is more remote,
more unapproachable, and more immovable than a mountain?

The Bible portrays mountains as setting for God's self-disclosure.
Moses receives the Law and looks upon the Lord on Mt. Sinai. On
Mt. Horeb, Elijah communicates with God in a mysterious silence.
From a wilderness rise, Jesus teaches the blessed ways of the
kingdom. Atop a mountain Peter and James and John see Jesus in
the fullness of his divine glory. Mountain tops are regions in
which discernment sharpens and contemplative visions crystallize,
but only after the rigors of the ascent.

John Krakauer wrote a book titled: *Into Thin Air*. It's a personal account of a climbing disaster on Mr. Everest. He writes:

When confronted with an increase in altitude, the human body adjusts in manifold ways, from increasing respiration, to changing the pH of the blood, to radically boosting the number of oxygen-carrying red blood cells....a conversion that takes weeks to complete. The physiological changes needed to sustain life in the higher reaches of the great mountains have their spiritual counterparts in the soul's ascent to God. Loves desire for intimate communion with the Holy One will demand adjustments to the frame of our thinking, the content of our feeling, the direction of our willing...a conversion that takes years to take hold.

No wonder Peter didn't get it immediately, it takes time, you see...a long time...maybe years...maybe a lifetime.

I cannot say for certain how long it takes. I only know that it is worth the climb, and that at the end of the path we may well see the glory of God, that we may well know God as never before. But such a goal surely does not reduce the dangers or difficulties of the

climb. There is so much to learn and understand about our limits, so much to grasp about proper discipline and preparation, and so much strength needed beyond our own perceived strength if we are ever to reach the summit.

The fourth century theologian and mystic Gregory of Nyssa states:

The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to

climb. I know first hand that it's a difficult climb. That much I know. How long it will take, or what kind of effort, I don't know and can't say. I don't know because like most of you, I am still climbing. And some days the ascent is treacherous and demanding, and I find myself more than a bit shaking and really out of breath.

But it is worth the relentless climb; of that I am absolutely convinced.

Will you bow your heads with me and pray? Go the journey with us God, for the path is steep and our breath is short. Accompany us with your patience; walk with us in your grace. Through Christ our Lord.