

## The Season of Creation: Mountain

During seminary I had the chance to work with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, ACMNP. This organization (which is not in any way connected to or funded by the National Park Services) is a great opportunity for college and seminary students. ACMNP helps you find a job within the national parks and in exchange you help lead worship services in the campgrounds.

My first year with ACMNP, I spent my summer working in the Grand Tetons. Wow, talk about an incredible mountain range. I grew up in the foothills of NC and had never been further west than the Smokey Mountains of East TN. I was in for a grand surprise. Located in northwestern Wyoming, the Grand Teton National Park preserves a spectacular landscape rich with majestic mountains, pristine lakes, and extraordinary wildlife. The abrupt vertical rise of the jagged Teton Range contrasts with the horizontal sage-covered valley and glacial lakes at their base, creating world-renowned scenery. I spent most of my summer trying to permanently etch the breathtaking scenery into my memory so that when I came back to the gray skyscrapers and traffic jams of Atlanta I would be able to close my eyes and instantaneously be transported (at least in my imagination) back to the Tetons.

While in the Tetons I worked at the Activities Desk at Jackson Lake Lodge and led worship services in the campground on Sunday, but my primary objective was to hike as many trails and see as much of the landscape and wildlife as I could. Some of those encounters came very unexpectedly, such as walking by a quite large mother moose and her child. It was about 6:00 am, the soft orange hue of the morning sunrise was beginning to light the sky, and I was sluggishly walking in a daze wondering how the sun could be rising at 6am here, but yet thankful because it meant longer days to play and explore. As my mind began to travel onto the hikes that might come after work that day, my heart suddenly leapt right out of my chest. My mind raced to catch up with what was going on and I realized that about six feet in front of me stood a mother moose and her baby. It's amazing all the things that can race through your mind in a split second. This was my first time seeing a real live moose. I was overwhelmed with her beauty. Her power and strength were quite visibly portrayed through her stance and massive size. That was all noted in the first millisecond that I was aware of her presence. Within the second millisecond my brain registered that indeed this new creature was a moose, was indeed powerful, could kill me if she so choose. In the fourth or fifth millisecond, I simply nodded as to say Good Morning. She continued her direct gaze at me, seemingly glad now that she had my full attention. She looked down at her child and signaled it was time to go, and they trotted off away from the cabins. At which point I began to breathe again and continued my journey to work, much more alert to my surroundings. That would not be my only exciting encounter with wildlife that summer, but the rest I'll have to share with you another time. Right now I want to try to describe to you a very powerful God moment I experience while hiking in the Tetons.

Hiking -- backcountry hiking and camping -- is a bitter, sweet relationship. You love the idea and the adventure, pushing your limits, seeing new sights, and building lifelong friendships, but it is often with much inner grumbling that you struggle up the mountain hot and sweaty, carrying a pack on your back that just seems to get heavier with every step. That is the way this particular

trip began. We had exactly 24 hours from the time the morning shift ended until we needed to be back at work the next day for the evening shift. By my calculations (and many of you know I'm a tad bit optimistic) that was plenty of time to drive to the trail head, hike in 5-7 miles, set up camp, sleep, and be up early and continue on our way to finish off the 15 miles of trails before needing to be back at work. Very doable. So we planned the details in advance and were ready to go as soon as work ended.

All was going well, except well...our timing. We were going as fast as we could but in all actuality the climb was steep and after a few hours we were going very slowly. That's usually when all the inner groaning begins. There were three of us and I was in the middle. Ahead of me, my friend was a cross-country runner. Although she too was struggling, I believe she could have run up the whole mountain. At least she could have in comparison to my speed, which was a hot trot compared to our third friend who...well.. let's just say she never ventured on a hiking trip with us again. But thank goodness for the encouragement of our first friend. Whether she was just in better shape or more worried about it getting dark, not having a place to camp, and rain approaching, she constantly hastened us forward. We did finally come to a small clearing with land level enough to place a tent. Just as the first rain drop was falling I popped up my little two person tent and all three of us piled in gear and all. You see, we were too tired to figure out how to store our gear so it wouldn't get wet, their tent poles seemed, oddly enough, to be broken, and because I didn't want to be tired, cold, and wet without any discussion I said "Get in" and we all piled in. We sat there for a few minutes just awkwardly holding our gear. We were thankful to be dry and mostly thankful to finally have stopped moving. It wasn't long though before the conversation started and the laughter began. The pain and agony of the hike thus far was forgotten and we drifted off to sleep.

We woke early the next morning and after feasting on bagels and peanut butter we launched off on the next part of our journey. We had been hiking for about two hours taking in all of our new and beautiful surroundings, the various forms of flowers and wildlife, trees and mountain peaks. It was then that we summited what we thought just to be another peak in our journey. However what we saw stopped us dead in our tracks. The view was so amazing and so breathing taking that we simply stopped. Stopped talking, stopped moving, and simply stared. The hot and dusty trail we climbed for hours had brought us to a peak where we looked out and down into a deep green valley speckled with evergreen trees, wild flowers, and boulders. In the middle of this lush valley was a sparkling blue, majestic glacier lake. When finally I was able to move my eyes from the mesmerizing blue body of water, I followed the ridgeline up to see the sharp jagged snow capped mountains above. My description of the view leaves much to be desired, but in silence we stared. We praised God and without any conscious effort we began to sing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him, all creatures here below  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host.  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

All fell silent again. We rested in God's glory and majesty awed by God's handiwork.

The trip wasn't even half way over, but we had reached the peak. I had seen the view of a lifetime, and with out a doubt, if I had ever questioned, I now knew firsthand that there was a God; God loved all of creation, and God was present in that moment treasuring our spontaneous responses to his glory and goodness.

My friends and I went up the mountain because we wanted to see new sights, to see God's creation that we had never seen before. Our journey up the mountain led us to experience God in new and unfathomable ways. But we are not the first people to have traveled up a mountain and to have experienced God.

**Moses.** Read Ex 3:1-6. Moses, while tending his flock, sees a most unusual sight in creation. Although he's not quite sure what it is, his curiosity draws him closer, draws him further into the mountain. His encounter with God is personal, frightening, life changing, and leads him to know and understand God in a different way.

Read Ex. 3:13-15. God name's God's self. God gives Moses insight into who God is. In Moses' encounter with God, Moses questions, even dares to argue, but he also listens and responds. Later on the return trip from Egypt with all the Israelites in tow, it is here on this mountain that God reveals himself again to Moses and the Israelites. Moses spends much time with God on the mountain. God gives Moses the new laws they are to follow and Moses sees God in all God's glory and goodness (or at least when God walks in front of Moses, Moses is allowed to see only God's backside as God would not allow his face to be seen.) Moses' one-on-one encounters with God leave his skin glowing with radiance. So much so, that the others were afraid to approach him. Moses began to wear a veil to cover his glowing skin. From what I see, according to Exodus, Moses was developing a personal relationship with God. Mostly it seems that it was God who talked, teaching Moses the new way and it was Moses who listened and responded to God's teachings and commandments, but occasionally Moses did ask questions and usually Moses' questions and requests were heard and answered in one form or fashion.

Moses originally went further into the mountain out of curiosity. **Elijah**, on the other hand, went up into the mountain not out of curiosity, not because it was a beautiful and breathtaking place. Elijah, a prophet of God, one who was accustomed to hearing God's word and responding, fearing for his life fled into the mountain seeking refuge from God.

**1 Kings 19:8-15** .... And the Lord provided refuge and guidance.

My friends and I went up the mountain because we wanted to see new sights, to see God's creation that we had never seen before. Our journey up the mountain led us to experience God in new and unexpected ways. Moses went up into the mountain because he saw a burning bush that was not consumed and he was curious. Elijah fled to the mountain cave because he feared for his life and sought counsel from God. Jesus went up into the mountain many times throughout scripture seeking solitude, seeking time with God, seeking renewal.

When all of these stories are held together what they have in common is personal experience with God that emerges from solitude with God. In the case of Elijah and Jesus the solitude was intentionally sought out. They went to the mountain looking for God, looking for a word from

God. Moses and myself, well we just happened upon a moment where we paused long enough to recognize the presence of God.

God is always present with us. God is active in our lives and in the world around us. However, we are not always present and aware of God. Sometimes we get caught up in the whirlwind of life, in the earthquakes of unexpected events, in the rushing to put out fires that are popping up around us at work, at home, at church, and unlike Elijah, we don't stop to hear God in the silence.

With the youth and kids we have *God Sightings*. When we spiritually check in with one another we ask, "Where have you seen God this week?" Sometimes it's in the life and actions of others. Sometimes it's in the beauty of creation. But the question makes you stop and reflect, "Where have I seen God?" or maybe even "How does one see God." Inevitably, sometimes the answer is "I didn't see God this week." At which point we begin to wonder "why?"

What this line of questioning does is begin an intentional line of thinking, one in which God is at the center. Your attention is drawn to God's presence and activity in your life and in the world around you. When you are aware of God's presence, you can intentionally enter into a time of solitude, a time of resting with and learning from God's word. God wants and invites all of us into a personal relationship with God so that we can come to know and understand God in new and deeper ways. Another way of saying this is that God intentionally seeks each of us out. It is often in a place or moment of solitude where God finds us ready and receptive to be attentive to God's presence.

Where is it that you find solitude? Where do you see, hear, or feel God's presence? Where do you experience God? Is it in creation? In the Grand Tetons or N. Georgia Mountains? Or is your Holy Place at the beach, in a local park, in your back yard, in the quiet of your home?

Wherever your Holy Place may be, I pray that you seek it out this week. For God seeks you out and desires to spend time with you. God eagerly waits and anticipates the moment that you will recognize God's presence and choose to spend some one-on-one quality time with God. God has so much to tell you, to show you, to share with you. Are you ready to experience God afresh and anew?

As we read earlier, "In Christ, you are a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.