

Bless to Me, Part 3: The Holy Mountain
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

Countryside Community Church

August 13, 2017

Scripture: Psalm 104:1-23; Luke 12:13-23

Poetry: "Coleman's Bed" by David Whyte

I. Holy Cave

[Note: This first section of the sermon was written and delivered by Dr. Amy Luckenbill, Director of Arts and Music. Subsequent sections are by Rev. Dr. Elnes.]

I'm not so much of a nature person. It makes me feel pretty inadequate next to Eric and Will and a few other folks on staff who really resonate with the outdoors. Getting older, having kids, and being married to a man who was made to chase Yogi Bear and the picnic basket has warmed me to nature. Still, I don't swim in anything that isn't chlorinated and my idea of a good time camping includes room service at the Hyatt.

In any case, last week, our family made an impromptu trip to Pennsylvania. My husband Don, who is from Reading, and the rest of our family travel there every other year or so. Each time we go, we have a few favorite things we like to do – Amish Country, Blueball, Bird-In-Hand, Intercourse, and Paradise, Pennsylvania. Yes, the Amish have a sense of humor. I love the quilts and the crafts. Don loves Civil War history, so we often drive the fields of monuments at Gettysburg and climb Longstreet Tower.

We also like to do things we've never done before. So, this trip, we went on a tour of Crystal Cave, a natural cave system that was discovered in 1871. Again...not a nature fan and certainly not a fan of rocks, nor of going 100 feet underground in a cold, dark, damp space – not my idea of a good time. My expectations were low.

We descended the first set of stairs to find the first stop of interest. It was a rock. Ugh, ok. The tour guide described how the first people came to discover the cave and showed how, when they touched the walls, left oils from their hands that have eaten away at the formation for over a century, permanently damaging the ecosystem. Interesting.

And that blob is a living stalagmite, over 500,000 years old. "Living?" I ask. "Yes, that one over there, for whatever reason, no longer has water dripping on it, no longer has

the residue of tiny particles building thin layers onto the formation. It is dead. This one still drips; this one is living and still growing.”

As we descend farther, I’m expecting a similarly small hallway. But no, we enter into what must have been the real reason Crystal Cave was developed into a tourist attraction that made men and women crawl through it in their Sunday best long before the turn of the 20th Century. It was a huge, vaulted space with every type of formation possible, including a pair of angel wings, ribbons of lace, a lion’s head, and a profile of Abraham Lincoln. We stood under the PA fault line as she described how plates have shifted, causing the huge sheet of rock to fall and create new spaces in the cave and how, when the plates shift, the stalactites and stalagmites don’t line up any more starting a new formation, the results of which will not be seen for thousands of years.

She told us that when a drop falls on your head, you have good luck for a year. Lucky for me, Don was struck between the eyes while looking up at a field of stalactites. Andrew and I joked that Daddy got baptized at Crystal Cave. He got hit a few more times before we left. And yes, we bought a lottery ticket on the way home.

I’m not a nature person, but by the time we were finished, I was completely taken in. Struck by how inconsequential I felt standing in the dark among a half-million years of work in this living organism. How the shift in situation means that the work has to start all over again. And how I will never see the fruits of the new stalagmite that forms after the shift.

I’m not a nature person, but I’m definitely a metaphor person. And this grand metaphor was not lost on me.

Remember that rock from the beginning? That blob that looked like a miniature sculpture of Jabba the Hutt? That rock was baptized millions of times over, drop after drop, blessing after blessing, practically imperceptibly blessed, over and over.

So I asked myself, “Aren’t we all?”

II. Holy Mountain *[Note: The remainder of this sermon was written and delivered by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes]*

In the 1990s era film, *The Englishman Who Went up a Hill but Came down a Mountain*, Hugh Grant plays a British cartographer who visits a Welsh village in 1917, in the midst of World War I. He’s there to measure the height of its “mountain,” which the villagers affectionately refer to as the “First Mountain of Wales”. Much to the dismay of the

villagers, however, the cartographer discovers that their “mountain” is really a “hill.” It falls a mere twenty feet short of the required minimum of 1,000 feet in height. The villagers are mortified. Their war-torn dignity had been diminished enough without this insult to their pride. So the villagers conspire to delay the cartographer’s departure long enough to build an earth cairn on top of the hill to make it high enough to be considered a mountain. Dignity restored!

On Friday, I discovered a little of what it would have been like to be one of those villagers. I visited Tastes of Soul Café at 24th and Leavenworth to try some of their fried chicken for lunch. When they told me it would take twenty minutes, I decided to wait next door at one of my favorite coffeehouses in Omaha – Well Grounded. Well Grounded is owned by a friend of Will Howell’s and a portion of every dollar is donated to an organization that digs clean-water wells for African villages – bringing these villagers some measure of dignity.

I ordered my favorite drink at Well Grounded – which is not coffee, actually, but chai latte. They make it like you find in India – full of pungent ginger and other spices, and not nearly as sweet as you find in most American coffeehouses. As I sipped my chai and waited for my chicken, I felt a bit like Amy Luckenbill’s husband, Don, upon whose forehead a drop of cave water had landed. “How lucky I am,” I thought, “to be sitting here enjoying this delicious chai latte while waiting for yet another round of gastronomic goodness when the chicken is ready.”

As I basked in that moment, I was reminded of how much more grateful of a person I have become this past year – probably more than any other year of my life. A year or more ago, I would likely have gulped down my chai and devoured the chicken while reading the paper or a magazine without noticing what I was consuming. I would not have felt that metaphorical lucky drop of water on my forehead.

“Yes,” I thought to myself. “I am a really grateful person now.”

But then my little pat-on-the-back was interrupted by a thought that seemed not to come from me but from another source. It asked, “Just how grateful do you think you really are for this chai and chicken? You count it only as one or two drops from the fountain of fortune, but really you are being showered in a torrent of lucky drops at this very moment and have only noticed a couple of them!”

I felt a bit like that darned English cartographer had examined my “mountain” of gratitude and pronounced it a “hill.” A “molehill” at that! Like those villagers, I determined to turn my little hill into the mountain I had imagined. Pulling pen and

paper from my pocket, I proceeded to record all the blessings that were showering upon me while I sat in the coffeehouse but had not noticed.

First I wrote, "Chai Latte" on the paper. I had counted the chai as a mere "drop" of blessing, but soon found others as I reflected. I recalled, for instance, that the tea and spices in the chai had come from somewhere; likely many "someplaces" – like India and other far-away lands. They had been grown, harvested by many hands, sold, and transported to Omaha through a whole network of blessings, and all I had to do to receive them was to lay down three dollars and fifty cents. How lucky was that?!

But there was more luck in my cup than the chai alone. It had been brewed with fresh, clean, *safe* water – a commodity that Well Grounded coffeehouse knows to be quite rare in our world and is actively working to provide the less fortunate.

How about the milk? The cows from whom the milk had been drawn were raised somewhere, processed by someone, many someones. It had been refrigerated thanks to many more "someones," sold, transported, and served by even more. Another whole network of blessings was sitting in my cup.

That hint of sweetness hadn't appeared out of nowhere, either. The cane sugar was probably grown, harvested, and processed in Hawaii. The cup itself, with its beautiful decoration, had been manufactured and transported from Italy. The chair and table I was sitting at were made of wood – wood that had taken years to grow somewhere, cared for by someone, then harvested and fashioned into furniture by still others.

These thoughts led to still more – like the comfortable clothes I was fortunate enough to be wearing as I sipped from that Italian cup, in the air conditioned coffeehouse. And the three dollars and fifty cents I had found in my pocket to pay for it all? It had been provided by none other than you all, who are listening to this sermon, in the form of my salary.

I realized then that even my ability to earn that bit of money was assured by the fact that I had a functioning brain, and functioning hands, arms, legs, and especially mouth! My ability to enjoy what I was drinking was assured by the fact that this mouth is full of functioning taste buds that thrill to the heat of ginger, and can discern the black tea from the sugar. These taste sensations were all running through my central nervous system, causing my brain to pump copious amounts of dopamine into my pleasure centers. The pen and paper I was using to record all this, and the iPhone that sat beside my paper, were all products of a vast network of other blessings that had come my way, and the people who provided them.

Looking over my paper – now full to the edges with blessings I’d written all over it – I realized that the mountain of blessings I had originally given thanks for had really been a molehill – which turned into a true mountain once I took the time to count my blessings. And I hadn’t even gotten to the chicken yet ...

III. Holy You



In his poem, “Coleman’s Bed,” poet David Whyte encourages the reader to:

*Make a nesting now, a place to which
the birds can come, think of Kevin’s
prayerful palm holding the blackbird’s egg
and be the one, looking out from this place
who warms interior forms into light.*

The “Kevin” in Whyte’s poem is a reference to the 6th Century Celtic St. Kevin of Glendalough. I’ll be visiting the grounds of Kevin’s ancient monastery with a couple of friends after the Ireland retreat I am co-leading is over. According to legend, Kevin made a practice of counting his blessings that was so deep and vast that he could spend hours, even days, just praying and giving thanks for them all. One day, legend says, while deep in prayer with his arms extended, his palms turned heavenward, a blackbird settled upon one of his palms and laid an egg there. So Kevin kept praying, quietly and motionlessly holding the egg as he continued to give thanks until a baby blackbird hatched from the egg and flew off.

Of course, this story is “mere” legend, but the truth this legend seeks to convey is precisely what makes poor people rich. And it is precisely what can turn any Rich Fool – like the one in Jesus’s parable today – into a holy and happy man or woman of God.

The truth is that gratitude doesn’t come easily. Nor does it come swiftly. Gratitude takes work. You can’t just sit in a coffeehouse and give thanks for the chai and chicken you are about to consume and be done with it. Like a delicate egg in your hand, gratitude must be carefully cultivated, nurtured, and even guarded for a long period of time – more time than most of us are willing to expend in our “fast food” culture.

Yet, if you take the time to really pay attention to your many blessings, what you harvest from your hard work and discipline is far more than the sum total of your gratitude.

When you create a mountain of gratitude, you receive something greater than the mountain in return. Something almost magical – even miraculous – emerges from your gratitude and extends beyond you. Like the baby blackbird, it is something precious that has a life all of its own. It flies away from you to bless others around you – especially those who have their palms turned up to bless the world and receive the world’s blessing.

Throughout Whyte’s poem about gratitude, he admonishes the reader to commit to a life of mindfulness – a life where gratitude is no mere afterthought or momentary act of piety, but a well-hewn discipline. Following this discipline, the would-be saint experiences each new day, and each new season, with childlike wonder and reverence. Mere “drops” of blessing are revealed to be the showers and torrents they actually are. Slowly, like a stalagmite growing in the heart of a dark cave, the soul grows and becomes more solid and beautiful, until a person’s inner being becomes a blessing to the world. The one who once felt proud to stand upon his or her molehill of gratitude now climbs down a mountain. A holy mountain.

Says Whyte:

Live in this place [of gratitude],
as you were meant to and then,
surprised by your abilities,
become the ancestor of it all,
the quiet, robust and blessed Saint
that your future happiness
will always remember.

By making gratitude your life’s essential pursuit, you become, as Jesus says, “rich toward God”. Your mindfulness and discipline, like drops of water falling on a stalagmite, slowly builds something within you that can never be taken away. And in this day and age, things that can never be taken away from us are increasingly rare.