



# “Long Strange Trip”

Text: Mark 8:27:9-8

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

If you don't know this about me by now, then you probably have not been paying attention. I have a thing for mountains and for mountaintops. I am crazy for the mountains and when I see the Rockies, or the Alleghenies, or the Smokeys, or Ben Moor on the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, or any other mountains, my pulse slows, my blood pressure drops, and I become far more human (well, at least nicer). I am looking forward to the mountains of Mull with our First Light Youth Group pilgrims this summer and a couple of weeks in Colorado this fall, during my sabbatical and renewal time. If I'm lucky - and that's a big if - I'll see the aspens in their golden splendor and with this new body I now possess, I might just make it to the top of Mount Crested Butte. If I do, trust me: there will be pictures!

In a far earlier time, mountains were seen as places where people could go to be closer to God. Back in those good old days, heaven was “up,” God lived in heaven, and so the “higher up” you could go, the closer to God - physically and geographically and therefore spiritually - you would be. Jerusalem was built on a mountaintop. The Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim, a high place. The prophet Habakkuk declares: “God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me walk upon the high places.” (Hab. 3:19) The psalmist proclaimed, “I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Ps. 121:1) Mountains are nature's gothic architecture, pointing toward the skies - pointing “up” - and they remind us of God.

Jesus is with his entourage of disciples. We don't know much about the disciples from Mark. We don't know how many there were. We don't know if they are an all-male club, or whether women were included. We don't know the ethnic backgrounds of the disciples. They are Jesus' students and they are with him.

And they are in Caesarea Philippi, just north of the Sea of Galilee in an area that was inhabited by both Jews and Gentiles. Caesarea Philippi was one of the centers of the Roman Empire's power and authority. Herod the Great built a temple to Caesar Augustus in the city. Herod Philip named it in honor of Emperor Augustus. Agrippa renamed it in honor of Nero - calling it Neronias. Vespasian billeted his troops there for twenty days, was feted by Agrippa, and offered sacrifices in Augustus' temple. And who paid for all of that? The same people who always pay for the excesses of the empire: the poor and working people.

In the midst of this area, saturated and dripping with the presence of Caesar's empire, Jesus asks his disciples a question. It may seem like a strange question. In fact, it is. Jesus asks his students, "who do people say that I am?"

People have been asking this question in Mark's gospel, almost from the beginning. "Who is this that even the demons fear him?" "Who is this that can make the leper clean?" "Who is this who can forgive sins?" "Who is this who can make the lame walk?" "Who is this who teaches in parables?" "Who is this who can raise a little girl from death?" "Who is this who can heal a woman who has hemorrhaged for twelve years?" "Who is this who has all this wisdom and can do what he does?" "Who is this Jesus fellow?"

But now, Jesus turns the question on his disciples. "Who do *you* say that I am?" Seemingly without hesitation, Peter pipes us, "You are the Messiah." The word in Hebrew that we render as Messiah means "anointed" or "set apart" or "chosen." But the word carries more baggage than that, because the Messiah was seen as a political, military leader who would right the wrongs, a liberator who would set free the oppressed from beneath Caesar's heavy hand. "You are the Promised One of God, who will set us free from oppression and establish God's eternal empire!" We should be surprised if Peter knew the full extent of his profession of faith.

And Jesus' response? Jesus doesn't say, "Attaboy, Pete! You've got it!" Jesus doesn't say, "Brilliant, my boy!" Jesus offers not one word of affirmation in Mark's telling of the story. Jesus has them sign non-disclosure agreements! Jesus swears all of them to silence. Remember, in Mark's gospel, Jesus' true identity is a guarded secret.

Instead of regaling the disciples with visions of victory and peaceable kingdoms of plenty, Jesus tells them that they are now heading south - heading for Jerusalem - where Jesus will suffer, be rejected by the people, and be killed. The invincible warrior-savior of the Empire of God will be defeated by the Empire of Caesar.

It is then that Jesus tells the disciples about the very nature of the Empire of God.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

The Empire of God is not an empire in which we are guaranteed comforts and pleasures. The Empire of God is not an empire in which we amass the treasures of the world and glory in our prosperity. The Empire of God is not an empire wherein we glory in our accomplishments and boast of our place and position.

Rather, the Empire of God is one in which those who call it their home are ready to deny themselves - in every respect and in every way - in order to follow the path that Jesus came to pioneer. Citizens of the Empire of God are prepared and willing to make any sacrifice, face any calamity, endure whatever suffering may come because of their commitment to following the way of Jesus. For, ultimately, Jesus reminds us, that anything that can legitimately called “life” is found in the pathway of self-denial, self-sacrifice, and the complete and total embracing of the way of Jesus Christ.

Life is found in giving ourselves away to meet the need of another. Life is discovered when we break out of our self-absorption and see the suffering that surrounds us. Life is encountered when we take the blinders off from around our eyes and see the injustice, the unrighteousness, the hateful behavior - when we see the growing shadows of ignorance, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and falsehood, that have become emblematic of the Empire of Caesar and in which we have - knowingly or unknowingly - participated in for far too long. Life is found in repenting of past participation and rejecting future involvement in the anti-God, anti-Christ, Empire of Caesar.

And then, in less than a week, Jesus, Peter, James, and John are on the mountaintop. They have ascended the peaks. The world is below and they are that much closer to heaven.

While they are there they have an encounter that we cannot fully understand or fully communicate. In the highfalutin’ language of theology, it’s called a *theophany*. It is a profound and overwhelming encounter with God. Jesus appeared in dazzling brightness. With him were Elijah and Moses.

Now, let’s correct something right here. Elijah and Moses do not symbolize the law and the prophets as we have often been told and have often preached. Jewish understanding of the coming of the Messiah was based on the idea that before the Messiah would come, Elijah would appear to prepare the way. That Elijah appears lends support to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ - the Anointed - the Messiah. And if you need a supporting witness, Moses is a pretty good choice. God’s voice is heard to say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

And just as quickly as it came, it was gone. They were alone on the mountaintop. And it was time to head to Jerusalem.

I'm not sure any of that is what the disciples were expecting when they signed on with Jesus. Maybe they did. But my hunch is that they thought it would be a trip to glory and welcome. Instead, it was a trip to suffering, rejection, and death.

I am a child of the 70s. Those were my high school and early college years. You probably never expected that your pastor would be a listener to "The Grateful Dead." I'm not really a "dead-head." I could point out a few for you if you like. And I don't know if the disciples would have been "dead heads." I kind of think Peter might make a good one.

In one of their classic songs, there is this lyric:

Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me

Other times, I can barely see

Lately, it occurs to me

What a long, strange trip it's been

The hard news for the disciples is that the trip is only half over. The first half of the trip has been the easy part. The second half of the trip will take everything they have from them.

But, for the moment, "the light's all shinin' on me." For the moment, everything is as clear as can be. For the moment, the view from the mountaintop is glorious.

But, in a moment, it will all be gone. In a moment, it's time to come down from the mountain. In a moment, it's on to Jerusalem and what is waiting there.

"What a long, strange trip it's been."

What a long, strange trip it will be.

And what surprise might there be at the journey's end?

What a long, strange trip - for now and evermore. Amen.



609 South East Second Street  
Evansville, IN 47713  
(812) 423-6297  
[www.firstpresevansville.com](http://www.firstpresevansville.com)

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