

Transfiguration C
Peace, Seattle
February 7, 2016
Luke 9:28-36

MOUNTAIN REVELATION

Determined to mark our 50th birthdays with a winter snow shoe trip worth remembering, my friend Wade and I followed highway 99 as it edged along the cliffs of Halkett Bay north of Vancouver, BC, toward the Canadian town of Squamish. Our destination was the Elfin Lakes Hut, a large shelter in the heart of Mt. Garibaldi Provincial Park.

At Squamish we turned east and headed up Mamquam Road, a steep and twisting gravel roadway that, finally, delivered us to the trailhead. Then, packs loaded and ready we started up the well trammed trail, gaining 1000 feet of elevation in the first 2 miles and being rewarded with views of the coast range to the west and Halkett Bay far below.

In winter, with snow depths of 12 feet or more, the route to Elfin Lakes is marked with long orange poles. But it had been weeks since any significant snow fell here, and with a cobalt blue sky above us, and firm footing below, we had no problems staying on trail.

Four hours later, as we made our final approach to the hut, the rugged south face of Mt. Garibaldi dominated our view. It was the kind of day in the high country where you run out of superlatives to describe what you're experiencing. Everything was perfect. At dusk, as the last rays of alpenglow lit up the peaks to the east, we watched the moon sneak over the ridge and rise in all its fullness into the sky. It was a day to remember.

Inside the hut, which we accessed through the second floor because the first floor was buried in snow, we heated meltwater for our evening meal, and as we sat down at the table to enjoy it, I opened the hut journal, a notebook I'd found that recorded comments by people who had visited the hut during the preceding months.

Some of the entries were only a sentence or two. Several were written in French. But most were a paragraph long and celebrated the beauty of the place and the foresight of those who'd constructed the hut years before.

One writer wrote of being stuck in the hut with a snorer whose resonant sounds shook the rafters. She ended up taking her sleeping bag outside, and was much happier for it. Another writer complained about the party of three who'd packed up and left at 4 in the morning, waking other residents in the process. **REMEMBER**, he concluded in all caps, **PACK YOUR GEAR THE NIGHT BEFORE SO YOU DON'T DISTURB OTHERS!** (Exclamation point!)

On one page a girl of 12 and her younger brother, 8, shared the experience they'd had hiking in for the first time. They included a GRAPH charting the high and the low points of their journey. Now and then as I paged through, I'd read an entry aloud to Wade when I found it particularly humorous or apt.

And then I came to an entry that began most curiously: DO YOU BELIEVE IN ANGELS?

Hmmmm. . . this was intriguing. Flipping ahead I saw that this entry was much longer than any of the others---a dozen pages or more. Turning back to the beginning I began reading the account.

It seems the author had embarked with his companion on the Elfin Lake Trail during the beginning of what turned out to be a major winter storm. They had prepared for their snowshoe adventure with all the necessary gear and supplies, but what they hadn't anticipated was how hard it would be to break trail through 3 feet of fresh snow.

The guidebooks suggested four to seven hours for the journey, depending upon conditions, so they'd allotted themselves what they thought was plenty of time for the 11-kilometer trek. But the going was slow, and by the time they hit the trail's high ridge, six of those seven hours had already elapsed.

Fatigue was taking its toll, and they were only halfway to their goal. To compound things, it was the darkest week of the year, and the challenges facing them deepened by the minute as the wind and snow increased.

As they plodded on, taking turns to break trail one laborious step at a time, the long orange poles that marked the route to the hut became their salvation. The poles were placed 20 to 40 meters apart, which is a perfectly fine distance in most types of weather, but under whiteout conditions 40 meters seemed an infinite distance.

Finally exhausted from the exertion, and unable to continue, the author collapsed in his tracks while his partner slogged on ahead to locate the next marker. Their situation had gone from dire to dangerous.

After a minute of heavy breathing and frantic wondering whether he would survive this journey, he collected himself enough to call out for his partner. No answer.

He struggled to his feet and called again, as loudly as he could muster----still nothing.

- Had he stepped off an unseen ledge? Wandered off trail?
- Had he, too, collapsed somewhere up ahead? There were no answers, only questions.

**He dropped back down, quite unsure about what to do next.
And that's when the angels appeared.**

There were three of them. Two men and a woman.

And when they found him there they knew he was in trouble. They shed their packs and helped him take off his. They gave him water and something to eat. They stayed with him.

ELFIN HUT? they asked... He nodded. MY PARTNER'S SOMEWHERE AHEAD. . . I LOST TRACK. WE'LL FIND HIM, they assured him. They told him they would all travel together, after the nourishment kicked in. Only a kilometer or two separated them from the shelter.

Opening his pack, they divided his things, adding them to their own loads. They offered him more food and water. And just as they were getting ready to move on, the missing partner appeared.

He'd found the next marker. Water and food were shared with him, too, and then they headed out all together; the party of three breaking trail; while the two weary ones followed behind.

The journal entry itself, of course, was testimony that they finally did reach their destination. And on the final page, what I read between his lines was akin to a statement of faith—or something very close to it: That these angels were not imagined, not the invention of myth or fantasy; they were real. And they saved my life.

He signed his name, ROGER, and the date: CHRISTMAS DAY 2006.

Mountains are fickle places. One moment it's clear and bright, and the views are endless. And another, all visibility is gone.

Mountains are dangerous places. The experience of those two trekkers is a prime, though by no means unique, example of the trouble you can get into.

But mountains are also sacred places. Places where, under the right conditions, we experience the holy presence and awesome mystery of One whose glory is so far beyond us that we cannot conceive of it, much less grasp it... Yet who, in coming alongside us, makes himself known in ways that give us life and hope.

This morning we see that glory shining in the face of Jesus.

And though we, like Peter, James & John, haven't a clue what it means, nor language adequate to describe the experience, **still we know**, as clearly as Roger knew that Christmas Day, that God wills our good, and will not fail to companion us no matter how sublime or terrifying life's terrain may be.

As we leave the bright light of Epiphany's Mountain of Transfiguration, and make our way with Jesus on the long descent into Lent, we take this mystery and memory with us.

And we take, too, the conviction that, *"since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."* [2 Cor. 4:1]

May it be so. Amen.