

Getting there

Romans 12:1-6

August 24, 2014

Katahdin is an impressive mountain. It is actually a massif, a massive, horseshoe-shaped ridge comprised of six distinct summits rising abruptly from the forests and lakes and streams of the northern Maine woods. The six summits are North Howe, South Howe, Hamlin, Baxter Peak, South Peak and Pamola. Baxter Peak is the central and highest summit, the crown of the Katahdin massif, just under a mile high at 5267 feet and marks the northern terminus of the 2180-mile Appalachian Trail that begins on Springer Mountain in Georgia.

“Katahdin” is an Abenaki word meaning “greatest mountain.” That’s why it is proper to refer to the mountain as simply “Katahdin.” To say “Mount Katahdin” would be redundant, like saying “Mountain Mountain.”

“Pamola” is the name given by the Abenakis to the terrifying storm god they believed inhabited the mountain, forbidding any human approach. Pamola had the head of a moose, the body of a man, and the wings and talons of an eagle.

I have dreamed of climbing Katahdin for more than thirty years and decided that this summer I would finally try to make that dream a reality. I got my first glimpse of Katahdin at about 7:00 am on Saturday, July 26. I didn’t see Pamola, but the mountain itself was intimidating, a huge, dark mass, ringed with clouds, looming high above the trees and tree line, stark and forbidding, rising not far from where I stood, but seeming distant and unattainable.

The weather on Katahdin is a fickle thing. Like its New Hampshire neighbor, Mount Washington, it has its own distinct weather and weather patterns, almost always 10 or 20 or 30 degrees colder on top than at the base and windier. Mount Washington long held the record for highest recorded windspeed at 231 mph. I had originally planned to climb the mountain on Sunday or Monday, but poor weather was forecast for both days, so I had gotten up at 3:30 am on Saturday and driven the three hours from Blue Hill to the trailhead at Katahdin Stream Campground to take advantage of a short window of promising weather.

My route was the Hunt Trail, the last section of the northbound Appalachian Trail. The route is not high by Rocky Mountain standards, but the Hunt Trail is 5.2 miles from base to summit, with 4100 feet of elevation gain, making a round trip (10 1/2 miles and 8000 feet of up and down) a long and hard day, not to be taken lightly.

The crux of the climb is the Hunt Spur, a mile-long section about at the midpoint of the trail that includes much of the elevation gain. The trail emerges from the trees and isn't a trail anymore at all, but a very steep and difficult climb up a narrow ridge of jumbled boulders. The route is recognizable only by following the white blaze marks painted on the rocks. One handhold, one foothold at a time, sometimes using iron rungs driven into the rock, you make your way over or under or around the next boulder and the next and the next. It is exhausting and daunting work, both physically and mentally too because of the sustained challenge and exposure.

I climbed alone, but not really alone. There were probably a few hundred other folks on the mountain the day I was there. It is not crowded. People are well spread out along the route, but it is a popular and iconic climbing destination.

Most of the climbers were twenty-something young people, guys and girls, most hiking in groups, three or four together, or six or eight, with a few solitary climbers. There were some families, most of them sticking to the first mile of the trail that accesses a sixty-foot waterfall, but a few ventured higher.

There was a sixty-one year-old man, hiking alone, with a day pack weighed down with the mandatory four liters of water, food, headlamp, two fleece jackets, camera, knife, and first aid kit. That would be me!

And there were six young women -- they must have been Amish or Mennonite -- hiking in white bonnets, ankle length dresses, and tennis shoes. They carried small daypacks and climbed with hiking staffs. I knew what an ordeal the climb was for me, scrambling up the rocks using feet and knees and hands and elbows and I couldn't imagine trying to negotiate that trail in a dress!

At least two of the young women made it to the top of Katahdin. I know that because I passed them on my descent after summiting. They were sitting on a rock enjoying a snack not far at all from the summit. They had finished all the hard stuff, but they were in no hurry to get to the top. They knew they would get there, and I am sure they did get there.

Climbing Katahdin was one of the highlights of my Maine vacation this summer. It fulfilled a longtime dream. I can check that one off my bucket list. I made it. I was up to the physical challenge. And the views from the top were extraordinary. It puts things into perspective. It puts me into perspective. There is something, something about being in the wild, something that I find hard to put into words, that feeds my soul, that brings me home, that makes me feel whole, that fills me with joy.

But it's more than all that. Climbing Katahdin was about more than checking off a goal or enjoying the view. You can drive to the top of Mount Washington or Cadillac Mountain or any number of other mountains and enjoy the views, but it is not the same. It's not just about getting there. It's about getting there. Do you know what I mean?

Like they say, it's not the destination, but the journey. When you climb a mountain, both matter, destination and journey, but you can't have one without the other. You climb for the sake of reaching the summit, but it is the climb itself, every step of the way, that holds meaning, that matters, that provides the richness and depth and joy that you hold forever in your memory. A marathon runner will tell you the same thing. It's not just about finishing the race. It's about the running itself. It's about getting there.

So, why did I tell you this story? Because it's about getting there! Your life, my life, our lives together, are about getting there.

The one thing I do, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.

It's about living life with purpose, with intention, toward a goal, toward the only goal that matters. And it's about the way, the way of life itself. It's about getting there. And climbing a mountain is an apt metaphor for this journey, our spiritual journey.

The way is not easy. Following Jesus, aspiring to the life above, is demanding and often exhausting, physically and emotionally and spiritually.

It requires effort, sustained effort. It takes endurance, not just one grand heroic gesture, but the step-by-step, day-by-day grind of climbing higher and higher and higher. When you reach one plateau, the next ridge, the next peak, looms still above you. At every stage, at every age, there are new challenges. There are the special spiritual challenges of youth and of work and of parenting, but there are special and particular challenges in old age, too, of learning to find gratitude and joy in just being, not in counting moments to come, but in savoring this one.

Climbing mountains and following Jesus entail risk. There is much on the way that is beyond your control, much can happen and will happen that is simply a matter of the way nature is, the way the world is, the way people are. You may suffer injury or loss. You could die. People have died, climbing mountains and following Jesus.

There is much joy, indescribable joy along the way, but there is also pain. There is always pain. It is part of the way. The only way to avoid the pain is not to go, not to climb, but then you will never get there, and you will never experience the wonders of getting there.

There are no shortcuts. People may offer to fly you to the top, offer you a quick path to happiness and enlightenment, but even if they could, which they can't, you might be standing on top of a mountain, but you didn't climb the mountain. You didn't follow Jesus.

There are different paths to the summit. The Hunt Trail is one of a half-dozen routes to the top of Katahdin, each with its own particular merits and challenges. Some of the people standing with me atop Baxter Peak that day came up other trails, but we stood together on the same summit. It would be silly for me to argue that my trail was better than their trail. What mattered was that we climbed and that we shared the joy of reaching the summit.

But even more interesting to me, given my encounter with the six young women climbing in bonnets and long dresses, there are different ways of climbing the same route! We shared the same path. We had to follow the same steps, overcome the same obstacles, cover the same distance. Their way of doing it was very different from mine, in style and speed and dress, and yet we shared, completely, the fulsome experience of getting there. It's not a competition! It's not about winning. It's about getting there.

Our fall worship services will explore different ways of "getting there." The title of our series is "Loving our neighbors: Jewish and Christian traditions in Waterloo." We will not merely talk about other ways of doing worship, we will do it, celebrating worship in the manner of a number of our neighbors in Waterloo: Jewish, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Missionary Baptist, and Pentecostal, among others. We will experience for ourselves different ways of traveling the same path.

But the last and most important way that your spiritual journey is like climbing a mountain is this: you can't get there by dreaming about it! I long dreamed of climbing Katahdin "one day," but now I have. And it's not merely that I have done it, checked it off my list, but that the experience of climbing that mountain, the getting there, is now part of me. But it meant doing it: getting up early, driving to the mountain, shouldering my pack and lacing my boots and doing it, one step after the other until I reached the top.

The same is true of the spiritual life.

Because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you by a complete change of your mind.

You are called to live a distinctive life, a transformed life, a life not shaped by the ways and customs of this world as it is, but that's not easy. It will require effort. It will require endurance. It will involve risk.

It would be easier, much easier, to stay put, to stay off the mountain, to remain comfortably snuggled up in front of the TV, listening to what everybody else is listening to, griping about what everybody else is griping about, wishing for what everybody else is wishing for, even dreaming, dreaming about a world that could be, a world where God's will is done, here on earth as it is in heaven.

But you can't get there by dreaming about it. Just do it! Take a step, even one step. A journey of a thousand steps begins with the first.

When you do take that first step or even the next steps in a journey already begun, you may feel alone, but you will not be alone. There are others of us following the same path. And Jesus is there.

Jesus has climbed the same path. Jesus is climbing the same path, and Jesus will be your companion all the way. I know this to be true, because Jesus has been my companion all the way. Jesus was with me on Katahdin that day, and Jesus has been with me on top of all the mountains and through all the valleys to which my life has taken me. So I can tell you: do it! it's a great climb!