

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for February 8, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 40:21-31 and Mark 1:29-39

LIKE EAGLES

Growing up includes measuring ourselves against challenges so we learn to deal with both success and failure. Appetite for challenges varies from person to person. Some prefer the easy path, the light load, the goal close by and clearly in sight. Others have life harder and do not need to go looking for challenges; just surviving from day to day is challenge enough. But some adventurers push themselves beyond their reasonable limits. Greg Mortenson is one that kind, who goes beyond what is safe or even wise. He had to climb mountains, even though his fear of heights nauseated him in his early climbs. Because Mortenson spent his childhood in Africa's Tanzania, his first major climb, at age eleven, was the continent's highest. Once he had stood atop Mount Kilimanjaro, he was hooked, and for a time in early adulthood, he worked only enough to support his mountain climbing.

As often happens in life, Greg Mortenson's greatest opportunity for growth came, not from success, but from failure. Pakistan's giant K2, the second highest peak on earth, defeated him and nearly took his life as it has taken many. After being turned back, severely dazed and unable to navigate the path, Mortenson twice lost his way. The first time, he almost died looking at the frozen beauty of the peaks and glaciers painted in pastels by the morning light, and by sheer force of will, he found the path again. The second time, he missed a turn and wandered into the wrong village, but there Greg Mortenson would find a far greater challenge than K2. While some challenges take life, others give it by shifting success and failure from self-gratification to concern for others. Though we would say that little village clinging to the side of frozen mountains lacked almost everything we consider necessary to life, the village leaders told Mortenson there was only one thing they needed: a school for their children. That most of those children went barefoot in a place that took its drinking water from glacier melt did not trouble them, but the shame they longed to remove was the lack of education for their sons and daughters. Mortenson promised that, though he had no idea how, he would build them a school, and building schools for mountain children of Pakistan and Afghanistan became his life's K2 challenge.

Jesus of Nazareth rejected the call of success measured in terms of power, prestige, and luxury. Even comfort he left behind to carry to people the one thing he had to give: knowledge of God, which is knowledge of God's love and mercy. We say he gave his life on the cross, and so he did, but Jesus began giving his life for other people long before his

rejection of power, prestige, and personal goodness led him into a conflict with the good people that would end only when they had him tortured to death. Jesus of Nazareth found his challenge in people's alienation from God, shame in the face of religious and moral respectability, and near-despair with life and with themselves. He gave himself for those deemed to deserve nothing, the people who were just supposed to work and keep quiet, making themselves as invisible as possible to the easily disgusted eyes of the upstanding members of the community and of the people of God.

When Greg Mortenson quite literally stumbled into a village he had found by accident, the children (unintimidated by his six-foot, four-inch frame) took his hands and walked with him. By the time he reached the house of the village elder, some fifty children were following him. That incidental detail became a parable for his new challenge in life.

The Bible makes use of a curious notion about eagles. For the Roman Empire, the eagle symbolized conquest and far-ranging power. The Roman eagle soared over lands conquered. For ancient Israel, however, the eagle symbolized the renewal of life that had seemed spent, exhausted, nearly gone. Something about the eagle's molting process, perhaps, gave Israelites the impression that eagles renewed their youth and vitality, almost like the mythical phoenix that rises from the ashes of its burning, except, of course, that the eagle is a real bird. Psalm 103 says of the human experience of God's love and faithfulness, "so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

There's no use debating the scientific accuracy of this image: *Is the eagle's youth factually renewed?* That's beside the point. God meets us where we are in life, and the psalm takes what the people commonly thought at the time and uses it to deliver the real message, which is that God's love and mercy renew life when it seems spent and nearly hopeless. *The LORD does not faint or grow weary . . . but gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. The young and strong may fall exhausted, but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles.* This eagle image has nothing to do with the imperial eagle of dominion and that kind of power. It has nothing to do with the slogan, "Romans always win," or any modern version of overbearing self-confidence. The world is suffering the results of the arrogance of mere human beings who regarded themselves as "masters of the universe" but whose abject failure is now costing many people their jobs, homes, and retirement funds. It still seems beyond their comprehension that the common good is not well served by clever, unbridled self-serving and that, just maybe after all, the common good actually matters and the "little people" are not the real fools.

The prophet sent by God to the Jews in Babylonian exile has a few words from God about the high and mighty rulers of Babylon who so impress those exiles and reduce their

hopes for freedom to near-zero. *How can we go home, return to the land of Israel, when the masters of the earth make us stay? How can we put our hopes in the God who certainly seems to have deserted us? Are we not wiser and better off to keep our hopes small, our challenges manageable, and our dreams confined to our sleep?*

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Have you not understood . . . ?

To God whose truth is love and mercy, arrogant rulers of the empire are nothing and easily reduced to nothing. God's love for the chastened people cannot be confined to mere sentiment by the power of an empire. When God says the exiles are going home, the way will be cleared for them to go home, and no mountain real or figurative can stand in the way.

Part of growing comes in measuring ourselves against challenges. *Growing up* comes from picking our challenges, no longer from what seeks merely the pride of accomplishment (*I conquered the mighty mountain!*) but from the urgency of compassion, of love in its many and varied forms. Greg Mortenson replaced the thrill of standing atop Kilimanjaro and, he hoped in vain, the summit of K2 with the greater and more worthwhile thrill of seeing Jahan stand as first educated woman of the Braldu Valley.

Who is Jahan, and where in the world is the Braldu Valley, and who cares? God cares! God knows the Braldu Valley as well as New York's Wall Street, Washington DC's halls of power, LA's red carpets of fame, or Switzerland's Davos where the financial elite gather to decide what is best for the world. Jesus of Nazareth walked the dusty roads of Capernaum, and God knows the people of Bridgeton's Church Street as well as the people of its churches.

Boy Scouts test themselves against the challenges of hiking, camping, learning new skills, and earning merit badges. They also test themselves against peer pressures, the choices of bullying younger scouts or serving as mentors for them, doing a task honestly and completely or doing just enough to get the badge or rank, and stepping up to responsibility or shrugging it off with a "not my job." Christians test themselves against most of the same challenges other people do, with the same personality factors and varied appetites for adventure. But those who would follow Jesus and not just use his name feel the shift from the personal satisfaction of conquering the mountain to the challenges posed by the needs and sufferings of others. Churches face the same struggles as other organizations in our hectic, self-interested, and now financially constricting world, but we need to feel the shift as churches, too – the shift from self to others. What challenges are faithful to Jesus of Nazareth and true to his name? Amen.