

# Peaks and Valleys, Week 1 of “Stepping Into the Upside Down” Series

Presented by Rev. Kristen Lowe on 2-25-18  
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Mark 8: 31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

There is a binge worthy Netflix series right now called stranger things. It kind of reminds me of the old Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew Mysteries... only a little darker. It's set back in the 80s and it surrounds the town of Hawkins, Indiana. A local laboratory is conducting experiments and somehow manages to create a parallel place that is neither here nor there. And because nothing makes sense and everything seems almost opposite of reality, they term the place – the upside down.

Jesus came into the world and turned everything on its ear. The prophets foretold the coming of a king – someone who would save them. The Jews were expecting royalty – someone to free them from roman tyranny. Instead, Jesus was born in the opposite of a palace, saying his kingdom was not of this world and told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Walking with Jesus does not promise a smooth terrain. In fact much of it seems backwards.

Life is filled with peaks and valleys. A peak is something excellent that happens in your life, something great, and something to celebrate and remember. The birth of your child – that is a highpoint in your life. The day you get married – that is a peak. During those moments, it's easy to be a Christian. "god is good," you think to yourself. There's no doubt in your mind that god is blessing you.

But life doesn't stay on one plain. There are the valleys too. The troubles of life. Those difficult moments. A cancer diagnosis – that's a valley. When a loved one dies – that's a valley. During those moments, we say, "why god!!?" When you're in the valley, it's hard to say, "God is good." Sometimes your faith is shaken. And perhaps it was hard at that time to be a disciple. There's some doubt there, when you're in a valley, that god is blessing you and those around you. You say, "really?!? How could a gunman killing innocent school children be a blessing?" Jesus does not promise that life will be all mountain top moments. We live in a broken world. But that is why he came! He was born to die so that we might live. What a strange thing. It almost seems upside down.

Peaks and valleys – where are you right now? Are you on top of a peak? Or are you in a valley? Maybe you're somewhere in between – maybe there's a peak or a valley for you right around the corner, and you don't even know it. The disciples of Jesus Christ had no idea that they were about to enter a valley – they were about to go through a low-point with Christ. Things with Jesus seemed to be going so well – he had performed miracles – walking on the water, feeding the 5000. He had been surrounded by crowds of people, listening to his parables. It was easy to be a disciple of Jesus at that time. There was no doubt that this was the son of god, the savior of the world. The disciples were experiencing one high-point after another with Jesus.

But right around the corner loomed the valley of the shadow of death. The crowds would soon turn against Jesus. He'd be betrayed, and arrested, and tortured, and publicly condemned, and executed in the most shameful way known to humankind at that time. The valley was right around the corner. The disciples would be filled with

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fear and doubt that Jesus was the son of god. Soon, it would be very difficult to be a disciple of Christ. A deep, dark valley was right around the corner, and the disciples had no idea.

And so that is why today, Jesus takes them to the top of a mountain. He lets them experience something amazing – with their own eyes, they catch a glimpse of his glory. Right before the valley, Jesus takes them to a mountain, to a high point, and he does this to strengthen them for the difficult road ahead. Today, it is good for us to go on this journey with those disciples too, and experience with them this high point, for two reasons.

First of all, it prepares as we travel this road of lent... that time in the church year when Jesus descends into the valley of the shadow of death. You're going to hear about how he was rejected. How he was weak. How he suffered and died for the sins of the world. Our sins. During lent, we spend time looking within. We contemplate how we have fallen short and we repent and ask forgiveness. This mountain-top experience we hear about today prepares us for the valley ahead.

It also prepares us for something else – our own personal valleys. As we see Jesus glorified here today, it prepares us when we go through our own difficult moments. May god bless you this day, as you stand with those disciples and see Jesus reveal his glory – may your faith be strengthened, for the days ahead, as you prepare for all the different peaks and valleys in your life.

So... for the moment, we are on the mountain with the disciples and the curtain is pulled back. We get it! What an amazing high point for those disciples to experience. Peter wasn't really sure what to say or what to do, so he said, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters” he wanted this moment to last forever.

But that idea wasn't even a possibility. Instead, “A bright cloud appeared and they heard god actually say that Jesus really is his son, that he was loved, and that they should listen to him. Once again, this was good for those disciples to hear. Soon, people would be saying that Jesus was not the son of god. Soon, it would seem as though god the father didn't love Christ. The religious leaders would be saying that no one should listen to Jesus. But here it is clear – and we are given strength.

Here today we are reminded that Jesus is the son of god, the holy one spoken of by the prophets. Although he will be suffering and dying, he is still god and savior, doing these things to win for us our salvation.

This also helps us as we go through our own personal peaks and valleys in life. I don't know where you are right now – if you are experiencing a high moment, or a low moment. And i don't know where you will be tomorrow or a year from now. In reality, neither do you. For us today, right now, it is good for us to be here, because here we are reminded of our savior's glory, who he really is.

Today, god's word is your mountain to climb. Every time you come here, to church, and you hear the word of god, you have climbed the mountain. Here, you see Christ, who has taken your sins away on the cross and who has risen from the dead. Here you catch a glimpse of his glory, even if it's just for a moment. Sunday morning worship – the word of god – this is your mountain top. It is good for you to be here, because this is where you are strengthened for the days ahead, for all the peaks and valleys that are around the corner for you.

Let us pray:

Jesus, as we walk through the wilderness with you, help us to remember that you are with us no matter where we are. Help us to have faith where things seem counter intuitive. Help us to trust you when things don't make sense. Remind us that it is good to be here... with you. Amen.