

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Last Sunday after Epiphany and Scout Sunday, Year B, February 11, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Advancing in Faith"
Mark 9:2-9

the story about going up on a mountain in our Gospel reading today, and with this being Scout Sunday, reminds me of the mountain hikes that I took with the Scout Troop every year; I lived in Florida, but every August the troop would go for a week's hiking into either the Great Smokies or Pisgah National Forest; every one of those trips was a memorable experience for me; I'm curious: how many of you were involved in some form of scouting, as a youth or as an adult?; it was a big part of my life; a group of twelve of us joined the Scout troop on the same night, and five of us received our Eagle Scout award together six years later; I've been reflecting on what exactly I got out of scouting; here are some things that come to mind

I learned about nature; about its beauty from being outdoors for camping weekends in different places, at different times of the year, in different kinds of weather; I learned about nature's intricacies from studying different kinds of plants and insects and how to locate constellations of stars; I learned how to live out in nature in a way that created as little disturbance as possible; I learned how to be around and work with dangerous things like fire, knives and axes, boats, poisonous plants, and poisonous snakes: I've been close to rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins, and coral snakes; and of course, in Florida, alligators too

I learned how to cook and clean up for myself and for others; I learned how to learn; beyond the basic requirements, I got to choose what I wanted to learn about by selecting which merit badges to work on; and that helped me develop a real love of learning that has carried over into my being a lifelong learner; I learned that if you set your mind to it, you can learn just about anything; I also learned how to teach, by helping the younger boys learn the things I had already learned, and by helping them develop the same kind of love I had for the outdoors

I learned how to get along with other kids and adults who had different kinds of personalities and backgrounds and beliefs than I did; my troop had private school kids and public school kids (I was public school), country kids and city kids (I was city), not-so-bright kids and bright kids (I'd like to think I was bright); and we all learned how to get along in the very close quarters of camping and traveling

together; I learned endurance and perseverance by sticking it out through 50 mile hikes, 50 mile canoe trips, and mile swims; and through less impressive things such as thick swarms of mosquitoes in the Okefenokee swamp

and finally, and maybe most importantly for the career I ended up in, I learned how to lead worship; every Sunday morning on our monthly camping trips we had a worship service and took turns leading it; while my fellow scouts stuck largely to the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer, I would always prepare something a bit different; I brought in readings and meditations, some from non-Christians such as Gandhi and Thoreau, much to my Presbyterian Elder Scoutmaster's chagrin; but I learned to offer things that meant something spiritual to me and to my friends

now I want to change gears just a bit, as this is the final Sunday before the start of Lent, and recognize some parallels between scouting and faith; advancement in scouting is referred to as progress along the scouting trail; similarly, in one's life of faith, you might think about your advancement as progress along the faith pilgrimage—which is a kind of a trail; a pilgrimage is a trail which leads us to a closer walk with God, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit; a pilgrimage is a trail which leads us to a closer walk with God's creation, to a closer walk with all of God's people, and to a closer walk with our own true God-given selves; and Lent is the perfect time to be more intentional in advancing your faith onward into new or deeper areas

the Scout Handbook gives guidance on how to go about fulfilling the requirements to advance through the ranks; I still have mine, the 1968 edition, the year I joined scouts; Christianity does not have the kind of programmed advancement that scouting does, but the Bible is certainly the most important guide for our life of faith; it is not always easy to get motivated to read the Bible, or even if you do, to always find applications to your life from it; it is important to find ways to help you be regular in reading it and in understanding what the Bible means to us

what I introduced in Adult Education this morning is a program to make Bible study accessible to as many people as possible; it is a church-wide program called the Good Book Club; starting today, Episcopalians from all across the country are invited to read the same passages each day, from now through the day of Pentecost, covering the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles; this is a great opportunity to begin a daily Bible reading discipline, whether you have ever done that before, or not; we will also try to schedule a weekly Bible study group, at a time and day that works for most people, to review each week's readings together;

I would not have made Eagle Scout had it not been for the help and support of my friends working towards that goal with me; likewise, a Bible study group can help you stay focused on reading and study, and advancing in your faith; it is a great way for you to invite others, non-parishioners, non-churchgoers, who might not feel comfortable coming to a church service, but are OK with coming to a book club, especially a Good Book Club; and, obviously, it qualifies as a great Lenten discipline; one that will carry on even beyond Lent

recall that in our Gospel reading today the disciples saw Jesus changed before their eyes as he conferred with Moses and Elijah up on a mountain; I'm suggesting that you can approach Lent as a trail, a path, a mini-pilgrimage, not up a mountain, but to whatever place you feel you may more immediately encounter God; most of the young people and adults who participate in scouting, and who apply themselves to it, get a lot out of it, and find their lives changed for the better; a Lenten commitment is a lot like that; if you do it, and if you seriously apply yourself to it, chances are good you will get a lot out of it; chances are good that you will come out of it with your spiritual life changed for the better