*The Tree of Life*

I think one of the reasons I like the beach on the Gulf side of Florida is because there is an unobstructed view of the sunsets. Each evening people come out of their condos, motels, or 4esidences to stand silently on the beach watching the often brilliant splashes of sunset wonders. John’s vision reminds me of those sunset moments where the beauty of a full fledged and colorful sunset can take one’s breath away. But I’ve also seen the sunset in the mountains. It’s an entirely different experience. If the sunset is seen from the valley floor, the mountains stand in the way of observing its full glory. Shadows overwhelm the valley long before the sun has finally disappeared from the horizon. The only way to see the full glory of the sunset is to climb the mountain that blocks the view.

What we have in this week’s vision from Revelation is John’s full, unobstructed view of the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, the Holy City coming down from heaven. The details are glorious glimpses of the realization of God’s kingdom fully upon us. It is a glimpse we only get in bits and pieces as we make our journey upon this earth in faith. Most of us make that journey carrying the battle scars of life’s mountain and valley experiences. The obstacles of pain and trial in life diminish our ability to see God’s revelation of what will most certainly come in the future. Much of our time here on earth is spent wandering in the valley among the shadows of loss and disappointment. Every once in awhile we begin make our way up the mountain as inspiration and a sense of God’s presence moves us upward. But often the burdens and cares of life send us back down into the valley to take care of things and restore our sense of equilibrium. Sometimes we bring God back down with us and ask god’s intervention and healing while we are in the shadows of the valley of pain. Many times we find ways to block the pain and work our way around it instead of traveling through it. And that works for awhile, until some other incident opens the wound and sends us deeper into the shadow of the valley of pain. When we try to stifle our pain we also block out the ability to see the “New Jerusalem” experience that lies beyond the pain. By traveling through the pain, experiencing it in it fullness, we open ourselves and God opens us 8uip to the power that takes us up the mountain called healing into the full beauty of the sunset. Often it is after the healing of our wounds that we catch wonderful glimpses of the beauty of God’s full creation.

But not all of life is full of pain. Much of the time we spend our lives somewhere between the valley floor and the top of the mountain. Much of the time we spend our moments in the foothills living with a combination of joys, sorrows, success and disappointments that make up our existence. We get up in the morning, start our day with a reasonable expectation that we will make it through the day as we always have. Most of us start our day with prayer or creating a mental list of “to do’s” for that day. We don’t often think about the grand and glorious future that God intends for us. We don’t often think that someday this world will be immersed in God and we will see God face to face. Our lives just go on in the normal experiences that shape who we are and what we will do next. We distance ourselves from the aches and pains of the world, from the violence of the world, from the tragedies we hear in the news, from all the things that go wrong or offend our moral sense. We insulate ourselves from the lives of others so we can go on living each day to the best of our abilities. Living in the foothills, however, limits our view of the full sunset, our view of the kingdom of God among us.

I noticed one day while walking down a nature path, I was pondering my mother’s fight for life, that the pain of thinking about the losses that would eventually have to happen prevented me from sensing the presence of God in my usual way. I was all the way down the lane before I woke up to my surroundings and realized that the bullfrogs at the pond were engaged in a chorus of harmonious, back and forth mating calls and that the trees had filled in the woods giving that wonderful surrounding sense of peace. God was calling me to travel through the pain and begin my journey up the mountain once again.

How do we travel up the mountain to catch a glimpse of the “New Jerusalem”? First of all, we believe! Jesus calls us into the kingdom, into the awareness that we were created for existence with and for God. We cannot be a part of that kingdom unless we believe in that kingdom. We are called to walk in trust that God will travel with us into that kingdom. With Christ as the one who shows us the way, we are ushered into that kingdom even while we are here on earth.

Secondly, we live as if the kingdom was already here. We ask ourselves, how is the kingdom of
God brought closer through what we say and do? How are we representing ourselves as God’s ambassador to those who do not know about God’s future? How are we offering the fruit from the tree of life to those who need it most? How are we representing God’s love best to those around us?

Thirdly, we are faithful to the community faith that we have been called to. We help the church engage in those activities and discoveries that are most representative of the kingdom of God among us. We ask if our actions as church mover people closer to God and deeper into relationship with God through Christ. Are we caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, nurturing the sick visiting the prisoners (those who are housed in prison and those whose problems keep them imprisoned within themselves)? Are we caring for this good creation and seeking the ways of peace? Are we nurturing one another in faith and love?

Traveling up the mountain to catch a glimpse of the New Jerusalem involves seeking the kingdom of God first and receiving the blessings from the tree of life that comes with that kingdom. Catching a glimpse of the New Jerusalem can happen any time we make it to the mountaintop, no matter how simple the experience to gut us there. Circulating on the internet several years ago was this story: There was a contest to find the most caring child, and Leo Buscaglia was to decide the winner. This the story he heard: There was a four year old boy whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman’s yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him w2hat he said to the neighbor, the little boy said, “Nothing. I just helped him cry.”

The Book of Revelation talks about the leaves of the tree of life being for the healing of the nations. That little boy has ushered in the kingdom of God in his own simple, uncomplicated way. Can we do any less? Isn’t it time we start back up the mountain and continue on with our journey of faith, setting the kingdom of God as our highest priority?