

Lessons from Kilimanjaro

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Janet, think of it as an adventure!” Standing in the restaurant parking lot after an evening service at church followed by dessert and coffee, seasoned Wycliffe missionary Marilyn Laszlo encouraged me to pursue a life of cross-cultural ministry with Wycliffe Bible Translators. I had first heard her talk about carving God’s word on a banana leaf with a thorn at the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship missions conference in Urbana, Illinois, as a young adult. Now, as I near retirement and look back on years of serving in various capacities in two organizations and four African countries, learning three languages, and meeting interesting people including my husband, Ron, I can see that it has indeed been an adventure! In fact, the back of my first prayer card, printed by Wycliffe Bible Translators, states, “One of the greatest adventures in life is to be involved in giving the message of God’s love and salvation to a group of people who have never heard it in a language they can understand.”

Before leaving the continent of Africa for the last time before retirement, Ron decided it would be fun to climb to the highest peak, Mt. Kilimanjaro. We contacted Bless Africa Tours at the recommendation of fellow missionaries and invited our adult children who live in the United States, Michelle and Nathan, with their spouses, Nate and Cassidy, to join us in Tanzania. Our son Ben and his girlfriend, Mikayla, who had been serving in Cameroon with us in our last year, flew with us from Yaoundé to Moshi, Tanzania. We all met up in Moshi and prepared for the climb. You could say it’s “a walk in the park” as it is a hike in a national park, albeit a very hard hike. As highest continental peaks in the world go, it is the most do-able highest peak; it is not a technical climb and no special equipment is needed.

To hike the 19,341-foot-high peak, we chose the seven-day route: five days up and two days down. It was quite a bonding experience for our family, filled with challenges, triumphs, and amazing views. As we descended on the sixth and seventh days, I began to reflect on our whole life of ministry in Africa. The hike was feeling like an analogy of that life.

Following Jesus on this life journey has been an adventure, which is kind of unusual for a homebody like me to aspire to. While Ron and the kids enjoy canoeing, camping, climbing mountains in Colorado, and bouldering at climbing walls, I am content to stay home on a cozy couch with a cup of coffee and a good book! But at age fourteen, at junior high camp at Portage Lake Covenant Bible Camp in Michigan, I committed to live my life to further God's kingdom. Inspired by Christ's sacrifice, buying my salvation with his precious blood, and knowing I will one day be accountable for the life he paid for, I wanted my life to count for eternity.

Pole Pole

If you look at the highest mountain in Africa from its base, the task of climbing to the peak seems insurmountable. The climb can only be accomplished one step at a time. In fact, the mantra on Mt. Kilimanjaro is "*pole pole*" in Swahili, meaning "slowly." We were told that those who are overconfident and climb too fast usually burn out and are unable to reach the top. Similarly, the tasks of Bible translation, helping to provide sustainable public health in rural Congo, starting a Bible school or seminary, learning a foreign language, and adapting to a new culture can seem impossible. But as the African proverb says, "You eat an elephant one bite at a time." Western culture values accomplishing things as quickly as possible. But on a journey with Jesus, there is often greater value in the journey itself and how it impacts not only those we intend to serve but our own selves. The end goal is important to keep in mind as we strategize in ministry. Reaching that end goal may take longer than we like.

Following the Guide

The first and most important part of the journey is to follow the guide. The eight of us on the hike had four guides: one leading the way, one bringing up the rear, and two in the middle. These guides have made the climb to the peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro multiple times. They have led hundreds of people with a variety of abilities, fears, skills, strengths, and weaknesses. The guides know the routes well. In fact, park regulations require all climbers to travel with certified guides. Some paths are clear,

but most are not. Attempting the hike without the guides would be futile at best, fatal at worst. When there were steep steps of rock, the guides gave me a hand, pulling me up. When I lost my balance on occasion, they caught me. At times I thought the guide was getting too far ahead of me to be of assistance, but then I realized they knew I could handle that part of the path without their being so near at hand.

On our journey with Jesus, he goes before, behind, and alongside us. He knows our every need, weakness, strength, and ability. It is he who gives us the skills and interests and aligns them with needs to be filled when he calls us into service.

The good name and reputation of the tour company depends on the climbers' success. Hundreds of tour companies lead thousands of people on the mountain every year. A thriving business depends on having a good reputation. In a similar way, for the sake of his name, the Lord leads us on the journey. Does that mean no harm comes to those who follow him? Not necessarily! But we can be assured that his purpose will be fulfilled, even if we don't see it.

Switchbacks and Setbacks

Sometimes the hike seemed to take paths that are counterintuitive to the overall goal. We made great progress climbing to a certain altitude, and then the path took a dip down toward a creek to cross before mounting back up. To get acclimated to the altitude we hiked from 12,000 feet to 15,000 feet for lunch and then went back down to 12,000 to camp for the night. It was discouraging to lose so much ground. But there was a good reason for it. That lunch trip showed some of us that we needed to be taking medication our US-based kids had brought to help fight against altitude sickness. Our guides let us know what to expect generally each day, but they did not give as much detail as we requested. After a particularly challenging portion of the path, we might ask Dany, our main guide, "Is the trail going to be steep or rocky like that again today?" And he wisely answered, "Let's go see!" The response was not particularly satisfying, but we just did not need to know that much detail in advance. It was enough to trust and follow the guide.

In our years of ministry there were also setbacks. Civil wars and unrest caused us to have to leave our homes in Zaire and in Central African Republic (CAR). We experienced armed robberies, a couple of vehicle accidents, and we never returned to live in our homes or continue ministry in either Zaire or CAR. But in the end, it was enough to trust and follow the guide. We might have wanted to know in advance whether

we would have to experience those things again in the future, but God wisely kept those details from us.

The better we got to know our guides and the longer we walked with them on the trail, the easier it became to follow them. We quickly learned not to question their choices even when the way they led us didn't seem right. The better we know Jesus, and the longer we walk with him, the easier it is to trust and follow him.

Fuel Up!

On the mountain we were encouraged to fuel up to sustain our bodies for the journey. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to walk five to twelve kilometers up and down rocky paths each day. The tour company provided amazing meals and snacks all the way. There were two cooks, a cook tent for food preparation, and a meal tent for us set up with a table and chairs. At each meal the cooks brought us an appetizer of popcorn or peanuts with thermoses of hot water to make instant coffee, hot chocolate, or tea. Then they brought in a hot soup, followed by a main course and fruit or dessert. Our kids, who have hiked and camped in Colorado, said if it had been up to them, we'd have eaten Ramen noodles at every meal. Instead, we were "glamping" (glamor camping)! Besides the meals, snacks were provided along the way. Just when we felt like we needed a break, the guides would inform us that the cook had prepared a treat for us. And suddenly there they'd be, waiting for us with a table filled with muffins, fruit, Snicker bars, Pringles, juice boxes, and thermoses of hot water.

In our journey with Jesus, it is equally important to fuel up on the word of God. Jesus said, "People do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," (Matt 4:4, NLT). Jeremiah 15:16 says the prophet found God's word and ate them, and they were the joy and rejoicing of his heart. And we are encouraged in Joshua 1:8 to meditate day and night on God's word. It is what sustains us on the journey with Jesus.

Another time I was reminded of the importance of God's word was on summit night when we were woken up at 10 PM after an afternoon nap to begin our hike to the summit. With headlamps on, we made our way from 15,000 feet to 19,000 feet mostly in the dark. I was directly behind the lead guide, watching every step he took, with my headlamp lighting only the space between me and him. Taking one step at a time, *pole pole*, the phrase "thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105) kept repeating in my mind.

Living Water

We were also encouraged to drink three liters of water each day, carrying as much in our day packs. Staying hydrated is vital in the dry air at high altitudes and helps stave off altitude sickness. The staff would boil water each night, let it cool, and filter it so it would be ready for us to fill our water bottles in the morning. In our years of living in Africa, we were often without either water or electricity, or it was cut off without notice. By far, living without water was harder than living without electricity. Water is life!

Jesus offered the woman at the well living water (John 4) and told her that with his water, one would never be thirsty again. Amazingly, he claimed that the water he gave would become in one a “spring of water welling up to eternal life.” After Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus about not observing the tradition of hand washing, we read that Jesus told his followers that it’s not what goes into the mouth that makes one clean or unclean, but what comes out of one’s heart (Matt 15:1–2, 10–11). So someone whose heart is filled with evil will spew evil from their mouths, defiling them. To the contrary, the mouth of one whose heart is a well of living water speaks healing and life-giving words. I have been tested and have, unfortunately, found my heart has not always been filled with the living water. In anger or frustration, I have spoken harsh words that have caused pain, but on those occasions that I spoke words of comfort and healing out of a Spirit-filled heart, I have been fulfilled.

Clothing and Equipment

We received a packing list of clothing and equipment to bring on the hike to prepare us for the wide variety of climate and topographical conditions. The day before our hike started, Dany, our lead guide, went to each of our rooms at the hotel and verified that we had what we needed: rain gear for the first and last days in the rainforest, proper hiking shoes, a hat, gloves, and several layers for summit nights, sunscreen and sunglasses or a visor for the days when we would be above the clouds, good sturdy trekking poles, wool socks, sleepwear, a day pack, water bottle, and luggage that was the appropriate weight and type for the porters to carry. We were able to rent from Bless Africa Tour company any clothing or equipment we did not have. For those of us coming from Cameroon where the lowest temperatures we had experienced were far warmer than what we would experience at 15,000 to 19,000 feet, it was a blessing to

be able to rent warm clothing and sleeping bags. On a short hike earlier that day, it became apparent to me that I would not do well without a good knee brace. Thankfully I was able to rent one from Bless Africa for the big hike.

When Jesus fed the 4,000 (Matt 15:32–39), his disciples were perplexed, wondering where they would find enough food when Jesus suggested they feed the crowd. Jesus then asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” He took the little they had and made it work, completing what was needed to feed everyone with seven baskets of leftovers. As we journey with Jesus, he does not call the equipped but equips the called. We bring what we have to offer, and he provides the rest, with excess. I’m not sure any of us really feels sufficient for the task to which we’re called, but we bring what we have and he provides the rest.

In terms of equipment for our journey with Jesus, we have the armor of God listed in Ephesians 6. Headgear, footwear, breastplate, shield, and sword equip us for the spiritual battles we face in service to the Lord. Additionally, we are told in Colossians 3:12 to put on “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” as well as forgiveness and love. Clothes like these not only help us love our enemies and the people we’re sent to serve, but they can also be useful in getting along with fellow servants. Relationships with other believers can sometimes be the most challenging.

Enjoy Fellow Travelers

The weeklong hike was an excellent time for our family to bond. We shared the pain and joys together as we took in amazing views, passing through the variety of topography and plant life. We found out more about each other’s intestinal health than most families probably know! There were opportunities for many discussions and conversations in which we learned more about our adult children’s lives as educators and professionals. And we had chances to serve each other. At times our son who majored in outdoor recreation shared helpful tips. Our other son, who majored in kinesiology and physical education, helped us train physically and shared the load by carrying my day pack part of the time. Our daughter, the high school science teacher, pointed out interesting plants along the way.

Likewise, in our journey with Jesus, we have shared pain and joys with fellow expatriate missionaries and African colleagues. We have enjoyed a close-up view of the Lord’s work transforming people groups through the translation of his word into their heart languages. We have prayed

together with African friends and mourned over sick and dying family members. We have prayed with Cameroonian parents for our children's physical and spiritual health. We have encouraged each other with words and practical assistance. We have seen students grow and mature in their walk with the Lord. We have learned hospitality, grace, and longsuffering from our African brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is in the context of community that God has chosen to spread the good news of salvation to the world. If the main goal was to spread the gospel as quickly as possible around the world, God could do so much more efficiently than by entrusting his precious message to fallible humans. Yet, even when Jesus has appeared to people in dreams and visions, he has directed them to believers for clarification and further learning through human relationships. It is in relationship with fellow travelers that we learn, grow, share joys and sorrows, and that the word of God is spread to the world.

Appreciate the Porters

Twenty-eight porters help us meet all the physical needs of our eight-person hike. These strong men carried our luggage, tents, bedding, food, meal preparation equipment, water, and the two essential port-a-potty tents. They made multiple trips up and down the mountain, resupplying us with fresh fruit and vegetables. They disassembled and packed up our tents while we enjoyed breakfast. Each afternoon they arrived at the campsite well ahead of us to set up our tents and lay out our sleeping mats and luggage inside them. They had the meal tent set up and the cooks were already well into meal preparation by the time we arrived each evening. Additionally, they encouraged us along the way with high fives, joyful songs, and by telling us we were doing a great job. The last hour, for a distance of about 600 feet, one of the porters held my arm, escorting me and giving me strength to reach the summit. Upon our arrival at the top, he hugged me, and we danced in celebration. When our son Ben proposed to Mikayla at the summit, the porters sang and danced in celebration. After admiring the incredible views, celebrating the accomplishment of all eight of us reaching the top, we descended to the base camp where we had last slept. I was again escorted by one porter on each arm, guiding and easing my exhausted body. It is safe to say that we would never have been able to accomplish the climb without the help of the porters. And most of the time they worked unseen, in the background, out of our sight.

On our journey in ministry, hundreds of people and churches across

the United States have supported our ministry, much like these humble porters. They have prayed for us, rejoiced and celebrated with us when we met in Congo and were married, and when each of our children was born. They comforted us when our homes in Zaire and CAR were looted and when we were unable to return to either of those countries. They rejoiced with us over accomplishments like the construction of the covered athletic facility at Rain Forest International School. They contributed financially to enable our ministries. The faithful servants who served in administration and in the Covenant mission offices in Chicago ensured that our physical needs were met. And they encouraged us with counsel, prayer, and guidance. We are grateful for all the people working behind the scenes on our journey in ministry.

Your Invitation to a Journey with Jesus

I conclude this analogy with an invitation to your own adventure on a journey with Jesus. As I said earlier, he could do it without us much more efficiently, but the Lord invites us to be a part of his redeeming work in the world. To decline the invitation would be to miss out on the challenges as well as the joys, both the trials and the amazing views of his wondrous work in the world.

What might God be calling you to do? It may seem insurmountable, but know that others have gone before you and that his purpose will be fulfilled, for the sake of his name. As you consider what he may be calling you into, remember to:

- Follow the Guide and trust him. He may take you outside of your comfort zone, but nothing is outside his comfort zone.
- Fuel up on the word of God to sustain you for the journey.
- Drink in the Living Water.
- Clothe yourself with proper equipment. He will use what you have and will provide the rest.
- Enjoy fellow travelers along the way. Learn from them.
- Appreciate the porters and be sure there are plenty of people upholding you in prayer and support.