

One New Book for the Preacher

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David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York, Random House, 2019)

Mountain climbing is not my thing! I suffer from acrophobia, a fear of heights. It's not a good condition for a mountain climber. It can be hazardous to your health. I have friends who are avid mountain climbers and God bless them. They train for and find satisfaction in scaling great heights, but that's not for me. When I first saw the title *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks, it was not appealing.

Once I began reading it, I found the book to be, as the hymn writer put it, "a balm to heal the sin-sick soul." I like reading David Brooks's columns in the *New York Times* and watching his insightful news analysis with Mark Shields on the PBS News Hour. I do not always agree with him, but he makes me think. He is a thoughtful and insightful conservative. In the last few years, there has been a shift in his perspective with more depth and spiritual engagement. It was with this background that I approached the book.

What I found was an amazing and extremely helpful response to the awful mess we find ourselves in today. I could list all the things that make "the worst of times," such as the outrage, hate speech, division, and violence. We are bombarded daily with so much bad news that our souls, individually and as a nation, are in danger. Harry Emerson Fosdick described the condition as being "rich in things and poor in soul."

David Brooks describes the struggle this way:

Maybe it is time we begin to see this as a war. On the one side are those forces that sow division, discord, and isolation. On the other side are all those forces in society that nurture attachment, connection, and solidarity.... And here's the hard part of the war: It's not between one group of good people and another group of bad people. The war runs down the middle of every heart. Most of us are part of the problem we complain about (269).

According to Brooks, we are living in a moment of transition. In order to make our way towards a moral life, Brooks uses the metaphor of climbing a mountain. He suggests that there are two mountains: "The first mountain is the individualist worldview, which puts the desires of the ego at the center. The second mountain is what you might call the relationalist worldview, which puts relation, commitment, and the desires of the heart and soul at the center" (296).

We are all familiar with the first mountain. It is the track that we are put on early in life. We get an education, begin a career, start a family, but when we scale this mountain, what we achieve may be considered "success," but it does not satisfy. It often becomes what we call a "rat race." Think about the story in the Gospels of Jesus casting out demons who requested that they be sent into a herd of swine (Matthew

8:28-34). Jesus granted the demons their wish. Imagine the herd rushing toward a cliff. One of the pigs asked, "Where are we going?" Another pig replied, "Shut up and keep running!" We may not be running off a cliff, but Brooks suggests we're in a valley where the aspirations of the first mountain do not satisfy our deepest needs.

The valley may be loss of a job, a broken relationship, the death of someone we love. It is such times that lead to genuine transformation. Sam Wells, former Dean of the chapel at Duke University, told a graduation class in his Baccalaureate address that if they had not learned how to deal with failure, then the university had failed to prepare them for the journey ahead. Brooks points out examples from the Bible, the lives of others, and his own life in which being broken open led to renewal and a deep joy. This is a turning point which offers an opportunity to climb the second mountain. He also offers a description of happiness and joy which is extremely helpful.

Brooks tells us about his own valley after a divorce left him feeling lost and alone. What took place in his life was transformation. His journey led him to the Christian faith by way of Judaism as they coexist in him now. It is a remarkable journey where he intersects with fellow climbers like Dorothy Day, Frederick Buechner, Victor Franco, and many others. It is a journey that takes him deep into the meaning of faith, grace, and commitment. As I was reading the book, I could not help but hear the words of Jesus: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Mark 8:35-36).

There is enough good sermon material and enough illustrations in the book to make it worthwhile. "It'll preach," yet it also invites you to take a look at your own faith journey. Brooks believes in the transformation of lives and of a culture. He traveled the country for a year as co-founder of Weave, the Social Fabric Project sponsored by the Aspen Institute, talking with people who have put relationship building at the center of their lives. In his travels, he encountered people climbing the second mountain by investing in the welfare of others and building community. It was an inspiring and hopeful journey.

There is much more as he diagnosed the illnesses in the soul of our country, which is a deep sense of isolation, which manifests itself in mass killings, suicide, and growing levels of depression and anxiety. His prescription for a cure involves investing in relationships and building communities. This reminds me of something my friend and colleague in ministry, the Reverend Mel Williams, used to tell his congregation: "Pick up the near edge of some great problem and act at some sacrifice to yourself." Brooks would agree with this prescription as a cure for our souls, and so would Jesus. I heartily recommend this book. It is my conviction that it offers food for the soul.