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I do not have to tell you that I am not an expert in Olympic terminology.

However, I always enjoy watching the Olympics, especially downhill skiing. The speed at which these skiers race down the mountains astounds me. They look so graceful, so powerful, so otherworldly....quite a different image from the one time I braved the slopes at Sundown Resort in Dubuque when I was a sophomore and got stuck in a bright orange fence and had to be rescued by the ski patrol.

As I play with the images of mountains and mountaintops between our Gospel reading for today (for Transfiguration Sunday) and the mountain images from these last Olympics, a few things come to mind.

As far as the Gospel goes, it is our last Gospel reading before Lent begins. In other words, it is Jesus and Peter and James and John, all on the mountain top, experiencing something utterly heavenly, voices booming from the heavens, clouds and images of prophets from long ago...yes, these men are clearly standing on holy ground. If they reached out, they could touch God—that's how close to heaven they are.

Similarly, picture an Olympic skier, poised at the top of the mountain, ready to race...heart pounding, eyes fixed, every muscle tense until the moment of release. If the skier reached out, he or she could easily touch God...up there on the mountaintop.

These mountaintop experiences have some common ingredients: a clear vision, perhaps a dash of delirium, a heap of adrenalin, a conditioned body, a prepared soul—

all mixed together to make the perfect mountaintop experience.

But you know the saying *what goes up must come down*. It's a forever truth, commanded by a force called gravity. The Olympic skier cannot stay on top of the mountain forever. Eventually he or she must take that deep breath and go down the mountain. As much as the disciples want to stay on top of the mountain, they know deep down they cannot. We are simply not made to stay on top of mountains...it's too cold for us, the air is too thin for us, the light is too bright for us. When I was in Nepal, I learned that even the sherpas who make their living by touring people to the tops of the tallest mountains in the world don't live up there. They live down in the valleys, just like everybody else.

So if we know we can't stay up there, we're faced with this challenging question: how do we get from the mountaintops to the valleys? How did Peter and James and John leave that mountaintop, even when they wanted to stay up there with all their heart. How does the Olympic skier make it down the mountain? Is it always finessed? It is always a perfect performance? Is it always a beautiful orchestrated sprint, to the awe and delight of those who might be looking on?

Sometimes. But not usually.

Usually, the descent involves some sort of catastrophic event, or at least a brush with one. Far more people tumble off Everest than ever reach the top of it. And it's usually on the way down.

In these last Olympic games, one competitor in the women's downhill event skied off course and the flag from the gate actually wrapped around her face for a few seconds...so she was flying down the mountain at breakneck speed, blinded by a flag wrapped around her face...now *that's* usually how people make it down the mountain...another skier crashed and as he tumbled off the course, the commentator said, “He is just *careening* out of control.” That's also how people usually make it down the mountain...careening out of control, bracing for the inevitable crash.

That describes real life.

I don't know too many mountaintop people. But I know a lot of valley-dwellers. I know a lot of people who have confronted their own mortality with a bad diagnosis. I have known a lot of people who have been destroyed—or nearly so—by loss, the loss of a job, a loved one, the loss of hope, the loss of trust. I have even known some for whom the pain of life was too much, and suicide was the only option. We are valley-dwellers. You don't need to be convinced of that.

And this is not just true personally, either. Our world, our country, our community, our parish—we are all in the valley. But we are all in the same valley, at least we have each other. We all live in shadow, we long for light. We all live in pain, we long for healing. We all live shivering in the cold, we long for warmth. So Lent might not sound too exciting for us...we might have a hard time getting excited about plummeting into that Lenten valley, because, truthfully, we've already been there for a long time.

The good news is that Jesus is also a valley-dweller...and he is one by choice...he chose to leave the lofty and cloudy mountaintops of heaven and chose to descend into our valley of humanity, to live with us here, to suffer with us here, to die with us here.

Lent is not a six-week period of time when Jesus abandons us. No, Lent is a six week period of time to look at who we are, where we are and whose we are. It's a time to remember that we might be beaten and bruised and blinded by our crash landing from the mountaintop but we are perhaps better for that rocky trip down the mountain, perhaps we're even stronger for it. We might feel like we are failures because we lose composure, break formation, lose control....The trip down the mountain is never alone. Never forget we have that valley in common. It might be the only thing we hold in common.

...And whether we make it down the mountain with composure, control and finesse or at a chaotic and disastrous breakneck speed, whether we tumble all the way down the mountain and land here on our backsides, or arrive here unharmed and intact, we all end up in the same valley...it's where we live, it's where we meet and marry and work and have babies and laugh and cry and die...it's where we find love and heartache...but it's also where we find Jesus and where Jesus finds us, because he dwells with us here, too...and so the valley of despair becomes the valley of hope.

...there is life here in this valley, even when it doesn't seem like it...don't forget what God's creative breath did to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones....and then think of the

infinitely wonderful things that God's creative breath can and will do with your bones, because, unlike Ezekiel's valley of bones, you aren't even dead yet. And so here, in our valley, there is breath, there is a slight stirring, and there is life.