

# The Way of the Valley

## Matthew 17:14-21

### Introduction

My dad always drove. It didn't make any difference where we were going, how far we were going, how late he had been up the night before... He always drove.

- As I got older and learned how to read a map, my mom would give up her front seat so that I could ride shotgun beside Dad. But not Dad. He never gave up his seat. Even after I got my driver's license, Dad always drove.

One day though, when he was in his later years, he and I were sent on an errand – to pick up pizza, I think. I started around to the passenger's side of the car when he flipped his truck keys to me. "You drive" he said.

Suddenly, things were different. Just that quickly, it was different.

When I read the gospel a few minutes ago, you heard me began at verse 14:

When they came to the crowd... (Matthew 17:14)

The "they" in that phrase refers to Jesus, Peter, James and John. "They" had been on the Mount of Transfiguration.

- There on the mountain "they" met Moses and Elijah.
- There on the mountain:

(The face of Jesus) shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. (Matthew 17:2)

- There on the mountain Peter blurted out...

"Lord, it is good for us to be here. (Matthew 17:4)

But that all happened on the mountain. Things are always different on the mountain.

As you know our Lenten theme this year is:

THE WAY

And you know, we are building these sermons around a single verse of Scripture:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Today the way of Jesus leads us to THE WAY OF THE VALLEY.

When the time on the mountain was over, Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain. And ...

When they came to the crowd... (Matthew 17:14)

Suddenly they discovered things were different down there in the valley. Things are always different in the valley.

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." (Matthew 17:14-16)

It is a really interesting contrast, isn't it?

- While three disciples were on the mountain enjoying the glory of God, their nine compadres were in the valley, failing in their attempts to help a desperate father with an epileptic son.

Of course, when Jesus comes, the problem is instantly solved.

Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment. (Matthew 17:18)

In a moment, the text says. Jesus spoke a word of rebuke and the boy was healed in a moment.

We don't know how long the nine were struggling with this issue. We don't know how long Jesus and other three were on the mountain. We just know that when Jesus got there, the struggle was over in a moment.

But rather than apologize to the nine for being gone, Jesus sort of rebukes them. Listen to what He says:

Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:20)

You have a faith problem, He said. Let me share two insights:

### **INSIGHT #1: FAITH IS BUILT IN THE VALLEY EXPERIENCES OF OUR LIVES**

Peter, James and John may have had more fun on the mountain, but the other nine had a better faith experience in the valley. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But it's true.

Like a muscle, faith has to be challenged in order to grow. And it only gets challenged in the valley.

Faith is inspired on the mountain, but it challenged in the valley.

You have no doubt heard about or even had a “mountain top” experience.

- People who go on a mission trip
- Kids to church camp

We love those times, but when get home, reality sets in. We are told “You can’t stay on the mountain.” But we sure would like to.

Earlier in the life of Jesus, He had another one of those mountaintop experiences. When He was baptized by John, the heavens opened up and a dove came down and landed on Him and the voice of God proclaimed “This is My Son in whom I am well pleased.”

- Do you remember what happened next?

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4:1)

The WAY OF JESUS will always lead us toward valley experiences, not to make us miserable but to help us grow in our faith.

Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

## **INSIGHT #2: FAITH IS BUILT AS WE BRING THE MOUNTAINS TO JESUS**

To the Jewish mind of Jesus' day, a “mountain” was a metaphor for a “problem.” Think about the verse again with that in mind:

Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:20)

Now, you know I don’t like to water down the words of Jesus or try to explain the hard things away. For example,

- I don’t think every demon possession story is about a psychological problem
- I DO believe God parted the Red Sea and Jesus walked on water.
- I DO believe Jesus fed 5,000 men plus women and children with a little boy’s lunch.

But this is an interesting perspective on this story – and one that makes it easier for us to grab onto. The nine disciples had a mountain – they had a problem. A big one.

- They were face-to-face with a demon, and they were unable to do anything about it.

It's a tragic story. This demon would throw that boy into the fire or into a body of water. His poor parents couldn't sleep because they didn't know what would happen to their son. Imagine that! That's a problem. It's a mountain-sized problem.

Down here in the valley these nine disciples were facing a real life problem. They didn't get the option of enjoying a mountain-top experience like Peter, James and John. They didn't see Moses and Elijah. No, they got to see a distraught father and a demon-possessed boy.

And they couldn't do anything to help fix the situation.

Very early in my ministry I was part of a situation like this firsthand. Terry and Cindy Roseberry were a young couple in my congregation who had tried for a long time to have a baby. Finally, after several years, they gave birth to a son. A son! Terry was a great athlete, and from birth this baby was being groomed to be even greater. This was the perfect kid, and they were beaming with pride.

- But just a few months later, the unspeakable happened. Cindy went into the nursery to get the baby up from a nap, and he was dead. SIDS was the official cause of death.
- As long as I live, I will never forget the look on Cindy's face the first time I saw her.
- Karen and I walked into the room and she – in mid-sentence – stopped the conversation she was having and came over to us.
- Her eyes were locked on mine. The look on her face was a combination of "How could this have happened" and "Tom, you need to fix this. You're the pastor. You can fix this!"
- And I'm thinking, "I'm the pastor. I need to fix this!"
- And, of course, I couldn't fix it. I didn't say it to her, but all I could think was "I have nothing to offer you." I remember feeling totally helpless.

That's life in the valley. Life in the valley is that real-life stuff that comes at us – the messy stuff that isn't glowing and happy.

- You know, up on the mountain, Peter wanted to stay.
- You want to stay in those mountain-top moments.
- You DON'T want to stay in the valley.

In the valley you find yourself feeling helpless ... largely because in the valley you are trying to do it all on your own. Look at what the disciples said:

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" (Matthew 17:19)

Why couldn't "we." One commentator wrote:

Engaging spiritual powers requires spiritual resources.

"We" can't do that. But Jesus can.

Bring the boy here to me. (Matthew 17:17)

And here's the secret of faith building in the valley. You bring the mountain to Jesus. It is in that simple action that the smallest faith moves the mountain.

- That little faith that I have is more than enough to say to Jesus "Here's the problem. I bring it to you."
- I can't do it, but I know Jesus can.

And so I bring it to Him.

### **APPLICATION**

What is your mountain today? What is that problem that stares you right in the face, and you know you are helpless to do anything about it?

Bring it Jesus.

Amen.