

Still Shining on Mountains and in Valleys

Matthew 17:1-9

Introduction

Have you watched any of the Olympics over the last week or so? There is just something about the Olympics that captures our attention, isn't there? When the Olympics come around we will watch sports that we did not know even existed before turning them on.

I heard one of the NBC commentators say: "For 47½ months, no one in the world cares about figure skating. But when the Olympics come around, everyone is interested."

- I confess. I'm one of those people.

The setting for the Olympics this year is beautiful. The mountains in the background of Milan Cortina are part of the Dolomite range, a region well-known for its skiing.

As I was watching a portion of one of the skiing events, it struck me that the goal for every one of those skiers is to see how FAST they can get OFF the mountain. Whoever can get off the mountain the fastest wins the gold. In other words:

The goal is to GET OFF THE MOUNTAIN, not to STAY ON IT.

Now, I realize that wasn't a particularly earth-shattering thought! But it is certainly different ... different from what was going on in our readings today.

In Exodus 24, Moses and a handful of others have been called by God to go up on the mountain so God can give them a copy of all the laws and commandments we can read for ourselves in chapters 19-23. Notice this verse from our reading:

The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and **stay here**, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction." (Exodus 24:12)

Notice particularly the highlighted words "stay here." Stay here on the mountain.

Now go to Matthew 17. This is, of course, the passage of Scripture we know as the "transfiguration" of Christ. Jesus took three of His disciples – His Life-to-Life group of Peter, James and John – up to the peaks of Mount Tabor:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. (Matthew 17:1)

It was a powerful time. While they were there, these three disciples got to see Moses and Elijah and a transfigured Jesus. It was so wonderful that Peter – don't you love him? – blurted out "let's stay here."

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (Matthew 17:4)

Why build a shelter if you aren't planning to stay?

Mountain tops are wonderful places. I love being in the mountains.

- Mountain tops WITH GOD are beyond wonderful.

If you hang out around church people long enough, you will hear them talk about their "mountain top" experiences.

A mountain-top experience is a moment when you have a special encounter with God, where you know you are in His presence, and you receive some kind of special blessing.

Let me tell you about one of my mountain-top experiences. It was probably my first. But here's the ironic thing: It didn't happen on a mountain. There wasn't a mountain to be seen. This mountain-top experience happened in flat Indiana farmland, near one of those lakes that you often see as a part of cornfield, especially around overpasses along the highway.

It was June 30, 1972. It was a Friday night about dusk, and it was the final worship service for the week of church camp I had attended. Rector Memorial Camp, Muncie IN. Middle school camp week. On that night, Rev. Dick Frederick and Rev. Ray Seilhamer were leading a lakeside communion service for all of us campers.

During that service I very clearly heard the call of God on my life, with the instruction that I was going to serve Him as a pastor. God did not speak in a voice that anyone around me could hear, but He clearly spoke in my head. He told me to "watch" those two men because one day I would one of them.

I was six weeks away from my 14th birthday. I had just finished my 8th grade year! But from that moment on, there was never a question about where I would go to college, what my major would be, what my career would be – and there still isn't. All because of what happened in that mountain-top experience that actually occurred near a lake.

If I were to open the mic and ask you to tell me your mountain-top experience, many of you would talk about a Walk to Emmaus and the profound impact that weekend had.

- Some of you would describe a crisis moment, a time when you needed to know God was there. And He showed you He was!
- Some of you would talk about a mission trip or give your own church camp story.
- At least one of you would talk about being on the military battlefield thousands of miles away from here.

It is a common Christian experience.

- If you can't think of one in your own life, don't worry! It will happen one day. I promise you.
- Your life will seem normal, and all of the sudden you will find yourself surrounded by God. And it will be amazing!
- And when it happens you will no longer think that Peter's outburst here is silly. Remember what he said?

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."
(Matthew 17:4)

In other words, Peter said ...

This is awesome! I don't want this to end!

But unfortunately, mountain-top experiences DO come to an end.

- The next morning Dad picked me up from camp and took me back home.
- Moses came down the mountain after God finished talking to him.
- And in verse 9 of our Gospel reading Jesus and the three disciples came down, too.

As they were coming down the mountain... (Matthew 17:9)

So what lessons do we learn? Let me quickly share three:

LESSON #1: MOUNTAIN-TOP EXPERIENCES CANNOT BE MANUFACTURED

It is always the movement of God.

- God invited Moses up on the mountain.
- Jesus invited the three disciples.

One of the criticisms of many worship experiences is that it seems like people are trying to manufacture a "God-moment." It is equally true that some worshippers try their best to avoid God-moments.

- Our God is always with us, but only He can determine when those extra-special moments will happen.

There is a story from the life of Peter where he laid his hands on a group of people and the Holy Spirit came on them in a powerful way. God did something amazing in that moment!

- Standing nearby was a man named Simon, who thought "This is cool! I want to be able to do that!"

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:18-19)

Peter made it clear that only God makes those moments happen. And Peter would know, right? After all, he was the one who tried to make that moment of transfiguration into something God didn't intend. God had to rebuke him on the mountain that day.

LESSON #2: MOUNTAIN-TOP EXPERIENCES HAPPEN FOR A DIVINE PURPOSE

When God called Moses onto the mountain, there was a special purpose God had in mind. It was there Moses received the final draft of the laws and commandments God had in store for His people.

Jesus took His three friends onto the mountain so they could bear witness to His transfiguration and become aware of the coming crucifixion

Every mountain-top experience has divine purpose:

God shines ON you on the mountain so that He can shine THROUGH you in the valley.

Moses had 40 long years ahead of him, leading a stubborn and rebellious people through the wilderness

- When the disciples came down the mountain, they were immediately confronted with a demon-possessed boy.
 - And of course, the crucifixion and their own persecution lay ahead too.

The Apostle Paul had a dramatic God-moment on the way to Damascus. He was intending to persecute Christians, but those plans changed. God had a different plan. Paul was to become a defender of the faith – not a persecutor of it. Here is what God had in mind:

This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. (Acts 9:15)

LESSON #3: MOUNTAIN-TOP EXPERIENCES SUSTAIN YOU IN THE DIFFICULT TIMES

When I was in my former denomination, one of my bishops felt led by God to enter into a lengthy fast. He described it as one of the most exhilarating spiritual experiences of his life. About a year after his fast concluded, he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. He would tell me his experience with God during the past carried him through the difficulties of his disease. He knew that's why God had led him up on the mountain in the first place.

Mountain-tops are never forever. But the impact of them can be.

Why was Jesus able to pray "Not my will, but thine be done?"

When Luke tells the story of Jesus' transfiguration, he adds this purpose for it:

Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30-31)

When He faced the cross, He was sustained by the events we commemorate this day.

APPLICATION

We have all had times on the mount, when we have seen things from God's standpoint and have wanted to stay there; but God will never allow us to stay there.

When I look at those mountains in Milan Cortina, all I see around them is snow. That's it. Nothing grows there. You don't see growth until you come down from the mountain. Likewise:

Our faith doesn't grow deep on the mountain. It only grows in the valley.

It is a great thing to be on the mountain with God, but a man only gets there in order that afterwards he may get down among the devil-possessed and lift them up. One writer says it like this:

We are not built for the mountains. Those are for moments of inspiration, that is all. We are built for the valley, for the ordinary stuff. That's where our faith is proven.

Enjoy your time on the mountain! I pray that you have many of them.

- But like those skiers ... don't forget that life is lived in the valley. Ministry happens in the valley. Faith grows in the valley.

God is with us in the valley, too.

Amen