

Up On a Mountain

Sunday, February 19, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Matthew 17:1-9

✚ Introduction: Climbing the hill beside the high school in Kellogg, Idaho to get a bird's eye view of the village below.

During the years that I lived in Idaho, I made use of a trail by the high school that went up into the foothills of the surrounding mountains. There was a place at the top of one hill that afforded a terrific view of the village and the valley below. A good place to pause, rest, ponder and pray. I still get those feelings when I'm at the top of a hill and, biblically, there seems to be something of hilltops that make good places of prayer. People in Scripture would set up places of prayer, sometimes to the God of Israel and sometimes to a false god, but going up to a hilltop with a different perspective and a chance to leave the everyday duties behind seems to have a universal appeal. There's something about getting out of the routine and going to the top of a hill. Today we look at a couple of events in which people went up a hill or a mountain to meet with God and consider how that applies to us today. We'll start with Moses, but most of our time will be spent with Jesus, Peter, James and John. In both cases we encounter mountaintop experiences with God and the ways people are transfigured.

✚ Set the stage

In the first passage, Exodus 24:9-18, Moses and the leaders of Israel went up to the mountain to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments. God summoned Moses and his assistant, Joshua, further up the mountain and eventually Moses entered the cloud that was the Presence of God at the top of the mountain. He was there 40 days. According to St. Paul (2 Corinthians 3:13) Moses' face shone when he returned from the mountaintop but the glory faded over time.

Centuries later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain. The exact location is uncertain, but one tradition site is in Cesarea Philippi, directly over a grotto with shrines to all the gods of Roman mythology. If there, Jesus picked the most pagan site of all Israel to bring His disciples. Wherever it was, in the hills over the valley Jesus was transfigured before His three disciples, with His face shining like the sun and His clothes becoming as bright as light. With Him stood Moses and Elijah (the passage does not explain how they knew it was Moses and Elijah). Peter, probably overwhelmed like the other disciples, says something about setting up shelter but they are overcome by a cloud and in it they hear the voice of God, telling them to listen to His beloved Son. They fell on their faces, and when they opened their eyes again, Jesus was alone and the vision was over. What was the point? What did it all mean?

✚ Main Point: "transfigured" can refer to both spiritual and visible transformation (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18)

The main point is that "transfigured" can refer to both spiritual and visible transformation. I think, in a sense, we need both during the course of our spiritual lives here on earth. The word, the basis of the modern word "metamorphosis", refers to someone or something (in this case the Holy Spirit, so it would be "someone") entering into the process of our days and experiences and fashioning us into someone new. It happened visibly with Jesus, revealing Him in His glorious, heavenly state, but it also can speak of what happens as a person grows spiritually over time. It is used in Romans 12:2 to speak of the transformation that is wrought by the Holy Spirit using sacred Scripture:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

The same word speaks of the Holy Spirit using prayer as a vehicle of transformation in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Jesus demonstrated a transformation when He revealed a glimpse of heaven to Peter, James and John, but there is an application of the same concept that speaks to our spiritual lives

✚ Application: Go up a mountain/this is My Beloved Son, hear Him

I see two applications for today: the first one is that sometimes, you have to go up a mountain; and the other is found in the words "this is my beloved Son, hear Him!" I think that there are times when we have to break away from our duties and routine and seek God in a special way to really grow. There's a reason why there's stained glass in church windows. They would like you to forget about the outside world for awhile. The sacred feasts of the Old Testament helped people to step away from the everyday and turn their attention upon the Lord for a time. People use that same principle today with Summer Bible Camps. There's something about stepping away from routine to meet with God that is powerful. Sometimes we have to find our way up a mountain.

The other application is found in the words spoken from God the Father to Peter, James and John; "this is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" Once you've been on the mountain, you cannot stay there. You have to go back down into the valley and get to work with the lessons you learned to guide you and the inspiration you've received to motivate you, you have to get back to the valley. Many years after this experience, Peter, toward the end of his days on earth, wrote of this experience. Here's what He wrote:

2 Peter 1:16-21

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

To hear someone doesn't mean to simply listen to them once, but rather to turn to them for insight and inspiration over and over again. Peter knew that the words of Scripture were as trustworthy as the words of the Savior, and he knew that prayer was a way to touch heaven because he had been on that mountain, seen that vision, and then had returned to the valley.

✚ Conclusion

We need mountaintop experiences; events, retreats, conferences, or maybe literally going up to the top of a hill to pray to meet with God in a special way and we need to return to the valley. There to use the inspiration to live and to work as led by the Spirit of God. If we stay on the mountain, we benefit only ourselves, if we never get to the mountain we miss meeting with God. We live and work in the valley, but sometimes we need to go up on the mountain.

Theme

God confirms that Jesus is His Son.

Object

Several bumper stickers

Scripture

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Matthew 17:5 (NIV)

Every day we see cars with bumper stickers. Does your family car have a bumper sticker on it?

What does it say? (Give the children an opportunity to share.) Some people have a bumper sticker to show support for their school or a favorite sports team. Others might have a bumper sticker that says they love their dog. I have even seen some bumper stickers with a Christian message. One of the first I ever saw was one that said, "Honk if you love Jesus." You've probably seen that one.

There is another one that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" That sounds pretty good at first, but if you stop to think about it, if God said it, that settles it — whether we believe it or not!

When Jesus was on the earth, there were a lot of different ideas about who he was. Many people thought that he was just a good teacher. Some people thought that he was Elijah or one of the prophets. There were some who thought he was John the Baptist. Even his own disciples didn't really understand who Jesus was.

One day Jesus took three of his disciples -- Peter, James, and John -- up on a mountain so that they could be alone. While they were on the mountain, an amazing thing happened. Jesus' appearance began to change. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking with Jesus. The disciples couldn't believe their eyes! Then they couldn't believe their ears! They heard the voice of God saying, "This is my Son. I love him and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he has to say."

Well, from that moment on Peter, James, and John had no doubt about who Jesus was. He was the Son of God. God said it and that settled it. Peter himself said, "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty...we ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the mountain." (2 Peter 1:16,18)

There are many people today who still don't know who Jesus is, but we know, don't we? He is the Son of God. How do we know? Because God said it and that settles it — whether others choose to believe it or not.