

The Mountaintop Experience: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Matthew 17:1-9 (NIV)

¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴ 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." ⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Chronologically with our Bible readings, we are about two years into Jesus' ministry. Six days prior to our section in Matthew we read for today, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples told Jesus what others had been saying about him. Then Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responded for the group, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:17) Jesus commends Peter's answer saying that this truth could only have been revealed to him by Jesus' Father in heaven.

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21) The disciples didn't want to hear this. They didn't want to think about Jesus going to die. They wanted him to rule forever, conquer all their enemies. Peter was so bold as to say, "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus rebukes him and shows him the nature of what Peter was saying: "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus was going to walk this path to his death. He knew that full well. He knew that if anyone follows him, follows his teaching, they too are going to suffer. He teaches his disciples that they are going to have to take up their crosses, an instrument of suffering and death, and follow him.

Now we are the six days later that Matthew was referring to. Jesus has taken three of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – up a high mountain. "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." (verse 2) Jesus goes from his normal every day appearance to a blinding light! Luke says that Jesus' clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Mark says that Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. Radiant, brilliant light emanated from Jesus!

In that light, as bright and as powerful as it was, the disciples were able to see and recognize two individuals who had not come up the mountain with them: Moses and Elijah. The three of them were talking, talking about Jesus' departure, his death, that whole deal where he was going to Jerusalem, suffer many things, and then be killed. Maybe Peter saw an opportunity. Jesus can forget about that whole dying thing. 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." (verse 4) This is awesome! Let's stay up here on the mountain. Let's make this last longer. We'll set up tents. Let's skip all this cross and suffering stuff. No one has to die. I mean, look! It's Moses and Elijah! Let's stay here!

Maybe I'm overreaching with this statement, but I don't think any of us has had a mountaintop experience quite like this. We have, however, probably had moments with the same mentality: let's make this experience last. When everything is good, when everything is copacetic, when there are no problems, when you are happy, all the stress is gone, you want those moments to last forever. Let's stay in this experience. Let this vacation never end. Let's just leave it this way – perfect, trouble-free, worry-free, no pain, no suffering, no bearing some nasty, rugged cross. Let's stay here away from all the pain and suffering of life.

Before Peter even finished making his request to stay up on the mountain, a bright cloud covered all of them, a cloud not unlike what we've heard God use in the past to appear and speak to his people. A voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (verse 5) This may have been the first time that these three disciples have heard the voice of God the Father. They may or may not have been there when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. "When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified." (verse 6) At that moment, the happiness and joy went away. It turned to terror. The question Peter asked, "Should we stay?" turned into "We should go now. We need to get out of here. We can't be here. We are not worthy. Almighty God will destroy us if we stay!"

Not to make light of the disciples' terror, but you have probably had a moment in some kind of social gathering that instantly made you feel not just uncomfortable, but inadequate. It's that moment when you walk in and you realize that it's a black-tie affair and there you are in jeans and t-shirt, teeth not brushed, hair not combed, body not showered. Or it's that moment when you start a conversation and quickly find yourself outpaced and outstripped mentally. They are talking about the philosopher of Sartre and you remember that you took a philosophy class in high school. They talk quantum physics and all you can think is, " $E=mc^2$ " and you can't remember what those letters even mean. Your mind is screaming, "Let's get out of here" all the while your feet feel glued to the ground. We want to go because we are not adequate. We are outmatched. We do not belong. Let's go before they figure it out.

This is what Peter, James, and John were forced to confront as soon as they heard the voice from the cloud. They were not adequate to stand before the holy and perfect God. In that moment, they became acutely aware that no matter how good they were on the outside, they were so far from perfection that it made them want to bury their heads in the dirt, hoping that God wouldn't see all their inadequacies, all their sins. That's why they no longer wanted to stay on that mountaintop, but they wanted to go.

We have not physically stood in the presence of the holy God. That makes it harder for us to relate to the feeling that Peter, James, and John felt. The closest we've come is when God reveals himself to us through his Word. It's through his Word that he tells us that he is holy, righteous, perfect, and that if we want to stand in his presence, no inadequacies will be tolerated. Any little sin that we have done automatically make us unworthy to stand before him, that we should, in fact, be cast aside, turned into dirt. When God gives us his commandments and says that we even have to be 100% pure all the time, not just in action, but also in our minds and our thoughts, then we start to feel uncomfortable. Then we really start to feel our inadequacies and our unworthiness before God. If I take a moment and reflect how many bad things I have thought, let alone said and done and realize that God will judge me for them and I have to be perfect, then I want to bury my head in the dirt. I don't want to be seen by him because I can't stand before him because I am so imperfect. It's not okay that I am imperfect. We say it's human, but that's not an okay thing. God demands perfection from us and he accepts nothing less. I am not perfect. I am not adequate. I cannot stand before him. If he comes to me, I don't want to stay here anymore. I want to go, just like Peter, James, and John did.

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (verses 7-8) Then it was all over. Peter's question about setting up three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was no longer relevant. The mountaintop experience was over. It was time to go.

Before we leave it, examine this scene one more time. Moses and Elijah had disappeared. The cloud and the booming voice were gone. Jesus no longer shone like the sun or was blindingly bright like a flash of lightning. Yet, who was still there? It was Jesus. Jesus was still there. Jesus was still with them. Jesus went and touched the disciples. He told them to "Get up. Don't be afraid." The disciples had every right to be afraid because they were inadequate, imperfect people before a holy, perfect, and righteous God. Yet there was so much comfort and so much reassurance in a simple touch and simple commands. Get up. Don't be afraid. You still have me. Peter, James, and John still had Jesus. Jesus was all they needed going forward. Jesus was all they needed to become adequate before God, to be worthy before the holy Heavenly Father.

It was time to go. The mountaintop experience was over. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (verse 9) Jesus was coming down the mountain knowing that he was still going to take up his cross. He was still going to go to Jerusalem. He was still going to suffer horrible things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law. He was still going to die on a cross. But even as he left that wonderful, blissful mountaintop experience, he reminded his disciples that he was going to rise from the dead. Don't tell anyone about this until after I rise from the dead. Then this will make sense. Then you will understand the importance that God the Father announced his approval of me, not once, but twice. Then this mountaintop experience will go further to show the world that I am God, equal to my Father. As such, I will die for you. I will die for your inadequacies and your unworthiness. And I will rise from the dead to prove that by my life, what I have done as both true God and true Man, that in me all the fullness of the deity dwells, that I will make you righteous. I will make you adequate before God. I will make you worthy before our Heavenly Father. That's why you can get up now. That's why you don't have to be afraid when you do come into the presence of God, as holy and perfect as he is.

That message given to Peter, James, and John is for us as well. You have had a mountaintop experience coming here this Sunday. You have seen, through the words of the Bible, that Jesus is both full God and fully man. He is adequate to take away our sins. God the Son is perfect for us in order to make us worthy before God the Father. But the time is quickly coming when you will get ready to leave here once again and take up your cross because you are one of Jesus' followers. What do we do now? Jesus, as God and Man, has made us adequate before God the Father. So, now it's time to do what God the Father said of his approved Son: "Listen to him!" (verse 5)

This Wednesday begins Ash Wednesday. It's an extra opportunity to come up God's mountain and listen to the Son of God who makes us adequate before God the Father. Ash Wednesday starts the church season of Lent. For the next 6 weeks, we will have

double the opportunities to go up and have these mountaintop experiences, to be touched by Jesus and hear his words of comfort, "Get up. Don't be afraid. I have made you worthy before God the Father. I have made you adequate. You lack nothing." Seize these extra worship opportunities. Be built up by God's Word. Go, stay, and listen to the approved Son of God. Amen.

February 26, 2017

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