

Sermon February 11 from Mark 9:2-9
“A Mountain-top Experience”

Have any of you ever had a “Mountain-top Experience?” If we look at the description of a mountain-top experience under the word “transcendence,” what we find is that it is a phrase that originated from the Bible and has come to mean a moment of manifestation of a divine or supernatural being. In particular, an experience of sudden revelation given by God. The phrase is often used to describe moments **where people experience a dramatic expression of faith**, such as when God’s presence becomes real. I would concur with that description, for I have been on that mountaintop in moments of spiritual intimacy with God.

This scripture starts as ordinary enough as Jesus and three of his closest friends, **Peter, James, and John**, travel up high on a mountain illuminated by the rays of the sun. Jesus was known to sneak off from crowds to pray and rest. Nothing unusual. But from here on, the usual goes to unusual, from ordinary to unordinary. No sooner do they arrive on the mountaintop, and as Jesus is praying, a sudden glow engulfs Jesus to the point he glows as his clothes become dazzling white, whiter than any bleach could transform clothes, looking out of this world white as light. Imagine the look on the faces of Peter, James, and John! Transfigured in majestic glory! Their eyeballs must have seemed as big as bowling balls. If that wasn’t enough, who shows up side-by-side? Elijah and Moses!

Then a cloud overshadows the mountain, and the moist air from the cloud closes in, and then the voice of God echoes around them, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Glowing faces and clothes, visits from historical figures from the past, hovering clouds, and heavenly voices. Wow! It is here where Jesus’ inner circle saw Jesus in all his glory and splendor, talking with the glorified prophets Moses and Elijah, a glimpse of what Matthew describes as what will occur in Jesus’ kingdom- a coming attraction. In a moment of amazement at the sight, they fell on their faces (Matt. 17:6). What we should learn from this passage is that moments on the mountaintop are rare moments, and they are meant for something in God’s purpose. Let us pause here and pray.

Heavenly Father, just as your Son needed to pray up on that mountain, may our prayer be like Jesus’ to replace perplexity with peace, fear with faith, consternation with confidence and courage, discouragement with dedication and determination, and hopelessness with hope. May our bumper sticker read, “Prayer changes everything.” We pray for our enemies to change our enemies, to change us. And so, it is now we come before you to transform our lives. In this, we pray, Amen.

Why were only these three men chosen to accompany Jesus: Peter, James, and John? First, these men comprised the inner circle of Christ. Secondly, in accordance with the Law in Deuteronomy 17:6, truth must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. On the testimony of two or three witnesses, a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.” Third, Jesus made a special effort to prepare these three for the leadership roles they would later occupy in the fledgling church. You might remember that Peter’s

nickname was the “Rock,” and James and John were nicknamed “Sons of Thunder.” All three were martyred because of their faith.

I pray that everyone can have that wow moment of a mountaintop experience. Some years ago, while leading a group of college students to the Passion Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, I witnessed God in brilliant white high up in the clouds. My mountaintop experience with God. I remember it oh so well. Allow me to share another unusual dramatic experience of faith—a true story, in fact. Remember one thing: Don’t try this at home.

The story is from a 33-year-old truck driver by the name of Larry Walters. One day, while sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard, he began wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to fly, but he had never had the time, money, or opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So, he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum chair – the kind with the webbing and the rivets, the kind most of us had at one time or another.

On July 2, 1982, Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He lifted off in his lawn chair, expecting to climb a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood. Instead, he shot up 16,000 feet, drifting into the controlled airspace surrounding the Los Angeles International Airport. Commercial pilots reported sighting him to the tower. Facing freezing temperatures and lower oxygen levels, Walters popped the balloons with his BB gun to establish a controlled descent. The FAA charged him with violating controlled airspace, flying without a balloon license, and operating a non-airworthy craft. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: “Well, you can’t just sit there.” When asked if he was scared, he answered, “Yes...wonderfully so.” Wow!

Larry Walters will never be the same again in his lawn chair after his trip to the mountaintop. He has seen things and felt things that will shape the way he lives the rest of his life. Like Larry, anyone who has experienced a mountaintop experience will never be the same. Oh, Larry’s lawn chair now resides in the National Air and Space Museum in Chantilly, Va.

It was the same with Peter, James, and John, who, up on that mountain, had been given nothing less than a glimpse into the future. They saw the suffering and death of Jesus, which the Master had predicted. For a brief moment, God had cracked the door to the end of time, and they had witnessed how history would work out for themselves and the world. They would never be the same again, having taken that ride. Think about this. When you have seen how everything turns out in the end, will it affect how you view the present? I believe it will. I know it will.

Most people experience life in the valley and not on the mountaintop. Things are different between the two. In Chapter Nine of Mark’s gospel, verses 14 through 24, Mark contrasts life on the mountain to life in the valley. “On the mountain, we encounter almighty God; in the valley, there is an encounter with the demonic. On the mountain, we encounter our faith’s heritage; in the valley, we encounter those who consider questions of faith as occasions for battle. On the mountain, God’s calming voice is heard; in the valley, human argument is

heard. On the mountain, the disciples are in a mood for worship; in the valley, the disciples are spoiling for a fight. On the mountain, the glory of God is revealed; in the valley, the power of sin and unbelief is revealed.

A mountaintop experience is transformative, resting in God's presence, not like a momentary and fleeting experience of eating a decadent, mouth-watering dessert that brings us back to the valley. The moment is life-changing, but not everyone is invited to the mountaintop. If that is the extent of our spiritual diet, we will be poorly fed. Our faith will be unhealthy, like carrying around a spiritual rabbit's foot that protects us from sickness or anxiety. Like the other nine disciples who were not invited to go on the journey, I suspect they were not ready. If we desire an invitation to the mountaintop, we must be prepared for the invitation. How do we do that? I'm glad you asked.

Peter, James, and John were invited to climb the mountain with Jesus because they were available and were already in his company. In this year 2024, the company of Jesus is right here in the church. Those who, for whatever reason, choose absence from the fellowship will not be ready to respond to the invitation. That is the first point: to make yourself available.

Secondly, we must learn all we can about our faith tradition: small group study, prayer, and personal devotions. A recent research survey from 2022 clearly indicates that there is a crisis in biblical literacy, and church attendance is sharply going downhill. It is very sad that to prepare for Christ's invitation to the mountaintop, we should have an air of joyous expectancy. The text does not tell us how Peter, James, and John recognized Moses and Elijah, but they did, and they knew how incredibly significant these men were. Had they never heard of them, the moment on the mountaintop would not have been nearly so memorable.

Lastly, listen to Jesus. Listen to him. We hear him as we worship in word and song. We hear him as we study the scriptures. We listen to him in the voice of other Christians. God minced no words when his voice spoke at Jesus' baptism and here again on the mountain. It becomes so easy to listen to other voices to the point of drowning out the voice of Jesus. Not good. Listen to Jesus. Remember where your work is—the valley. The church is only an institution, existing for the sake of those outside. If we listen to Jesus, we hear him say again, "Go, make disciples." Brothers and sisters, be ready when the moment presents itself—one disciple at a time.

As I began writing this sermon, I couldn't help thinking about Vince Gill's song "Go Rest High on That Mountain." Then I thought about the late Martin Luther King and his mountaintop experience. On the eve of his assassination, it was Martin Luther King's last sermon at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, and he concluded his remarks that night by saying this: "I don't know what will happen now. We have some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I am not concerned about that now. I only want to do God's will. And he has allowed me to go up to the mountain. I've looked it over. I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get

to the promised land. I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I do not fear any man, and my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

In closing, when you come to this holy place each week, come in through the doors, ready to meet Jesus. Come to meet him in person or through a song, a word, a hug, a handshake, or a prayer. Make yourself available. Is He worthy? HE IS! Amen.