

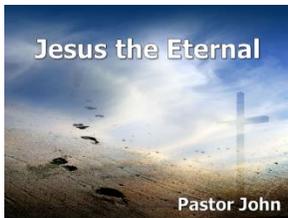
Jesus the Eternal

February 26, 2017

Matthew 17: 1-9

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the brothers James and John with him. They went up on a very high mountain where they could be alone. ² There in front of the disciples, Jesus was completely changed. His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ All at once Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus. ⁴ So Peter said to him, "Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

⁵ While Peter was still speaking, the shadow of a bright cloud passed over them. From the cloud a voice said, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!" ⁶ When the disciples heard the voice, they were so afraid that they fell flat on the ground. ⁷ But Jesus came over and touched them. He said, "Get up and don't be afraid!" ⁸ When they opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus. ⁹ On their way down from the mountain, Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had been raised from death.



Our passage today is a mountaintop experience for Peter, James, and John. It is one of those experiences that they will never, ever forget. Each of us has our own mountaintop experiences, those times when we feel so close to God that it is as if God was standing right next to us or was holding in the palm of His hand.

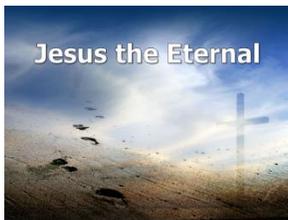
Throughout the Bible there are many mountaintop experiences. Noah's ark comes to rest atop the mountain after the flood subsided. Abraham climbs the mountain to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Moses hiked up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged and defeated the prophets of Baal. And later, on Mount Horeb, Elijah meets God in the "still small voice". In the New Testament, Jesus taught from the Mount of Olives. And, in today's passage, Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop. Throughout the Bible, mountains are symbolic of God's revelation to mankind. And to me, mountains are symbolic of the enduring nature of God. Mountains are grand and beautiful and majestic and powerful. To me, they are much like God.

Today, I'd like to begin today with a few mountains. But before we look at some mountains, how would you describe mountains? What do they look like? What do they feel like? How do they make you feel? To me, mountains are grand and beautiful and majestic and powerful. To me, they are much like God. Pictured to the upper left is the Alps, to the upper right is Mount Everest, to the lower left is Storm Mountain, and to the lower right is Mount Kilimanjaro. Looking at these pictures, would you add any words to how you would describe mountains?



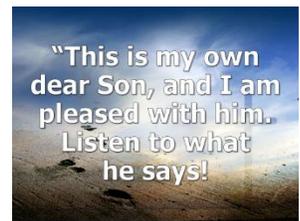
Of course, mountains do not need to be 15,000 feet or taller to be considered mountains. Some of you may be wondering about Storm Mountain, again pictured to the lower left, and my choice for including it in these pictures. But for any child or adult who has been to church camp and done a little hiking, you know why the picture is there. Standing at 5,192 feet, Storm Mountain is certainly not impressive. But that is part of the secret of the "mountaintop"

experience. Leaving camp at 4:30 or 5:00 AM and hiking to the top for the sunrise can be a moving experience. When I have sat there, on top of Storm Mountain, and take in God's creation all around me, I feel God's presence. It washes over me and fills me up. As the sun rises, one can certainly sense God all around. We can meet God on a small mountain too. And, the reality is, God can meet us anywhere. It does not have to be at 10,000 feet or higher. Or even 5,000 feet or higher.



In our faith journeys, we often hear descriptions of mountain top experiences. Perhaps some of you have also had encounters with God as you physically sat or stood atop a mountain. Perhaps some of you have experienced or have

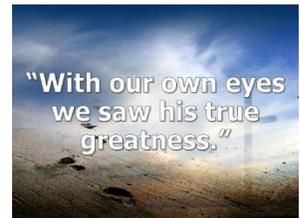
heard stories of people feeling like they are spiritually on a mountain top after a powerful encounter with God. In today's passage, three of the disciples certainly have such an encounter with God. For Peter, James, and John, they are invited to go up the mountain with Jesus and, once there, they witness the transfiguration of Jesus and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Jesus is transfigured and "*His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.*" It is so foreign and so unexpected that Peter chatters about building shelters for the three honored guests. But almost the instant these words escape Peter's mouth, God proclaims, "*This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!*" Peter, James, and John fall to the ground in fear when



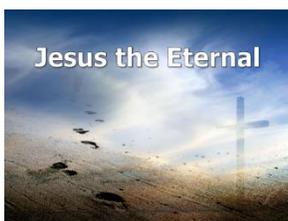
God speaks. Then Jesus is there, Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus touches them, saying, "*Get up and don't be afraid!*" All has returned to normal on the mountaintop, but certainly not for the three disciples. As they return to town,

Jesus instructs them not to tell anyone about this until after He has been raised from the dead. If I were there, I think it would have been hard to keep this experience to myself. But they are dutiful disciples and do not reveal this experience until after Jesus' death and resurrection. First Mark, and then later Matthew and Luke, heard the transfiguration story and all included it in their Gospel. Peter also wrote about his own experience in 2nd Peter.

Years after the actual event, Peter writes, "*With our own eyes we saw his true greatness.*"¹⁷ *God, our great and wonderful Father, truly honored him by saying, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. We were there with Jesus on the holy mountain and heard this voice speak from heaven."* Peter gives his eyewitness account of what he personally experienced. There is authenticity in this account. There is no doubt in his mind concerning who Jesus is and that God spoke to them that day. For Peter, it was great assurance of God's power and majesty, it was proof of Jesus' divinity, and, through this firsthand experience with God, he found the power to preach and speak with authority.



The same is true for each of us who have had a mountaintop experience, where we too have felt like we were in God's presence. We can tell you what it was like, who was there, what we felt, heard, and saw. These powerful events stick with us forever. There is a 'buzz' or a sense of excitement when we have such an experience. We move forward from that experience and we are 'on fire' for our faith. We feel like we can and would do anything for God. It is a moment of euphoria. And it is often a moment we long to recapture. It is a feeling that

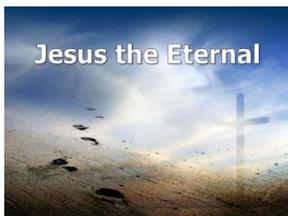


somehow lessens over time, slowly ebbs away. The fire becomes a warm ember. "Life" creeps back in. So often we long for that feeling again but do not know how to get back to that place or to feel that way again. The mountaintop experience definitely happened and was very real just then, but it now seems lost. In an article from Relevant Magazine, Lucy Worley writes of this lost feeling and the resolution that God led her to.



No matter how many new books I read or church services I attended, I couldn't find that same feeling. For two years, I kept this search up. Finally, one night as I just sat and cried with God, a simple realization came into my heart: I was asking for too little. God wanted to express so many things to me in new ways, but I couldn't let Him. I was still clinging to the mountain-top views behind me, when He was wanting to climb an even higher summit with me. My fear was that if it didn't FEEL like the first season of my life as a Christian, it wouldn't be as authentic. I had had some initial mountaintop experiences, and I was now associating those intense emotions with a healthy relationship with God. I liked THAT mountain, and I didn't want to put in the effort of climbing a new one.

I think we also find ourselves in this miry, middle ground, after a personal encounter with God or Jesus. We can remember what it was like, who was



there, what we felt, heard, and saw. We remember the intensity of being so on fire for God that we could hardly contain ourselves. But like Lucy, we cannot cling to what was and hope that that feeling would return. Lucy came to realize

that she was "*asking for too little*". God wanted so much more for her. God wanted her to experience her faith in new and amazing ways. Jesus wants this same thing for us as well. Jesus calls us to continue to trust in Him and to continue to seek that next summit. We simply cannot stay on the mountaintop forever. We must venture down into the valleys. Yes, the view from up there is wonderful. Yes, it was exhilarating to be there with God in that moment. But Jesus calls us to walk down and to engage life in the valleys. He invites us to seek Him in the midst of daily life, to be open to those same experiences and feelings as we faithfully live as His hands and feet in our own world.

While the mountains do draw our focus upwards, allowing us to see God's beauty and power, to marvel at the majesty of God's creation, the mountains



also allow us to see all that lies below, all that lies ahead as we move forward on our faith journey. Like the three disciples, we must take what we felt and experienced on the mountain and head out into life with all of that to strengthen

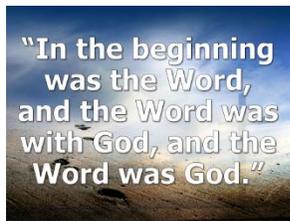
and encourage us as we live out our faith. Here are those same mountains from earlier. We can sense God's power and majesty in these

pictures. These next pictures are what lies below. Below the Alps lies a small community. The same for beneath Mount Everest. The same is true for all mountains and for all of our

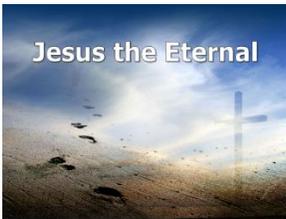


mountaintop experiences. When we venture down into the valley, we find God is there as well, seeking to meet us there, seeking to lead us on, for there is much work to be done in the valley.

Our faith has roots in the Old Testament, going back thousands of years. In the Genesis story, Jesus is right there alongside God. In John 1, recall these words:



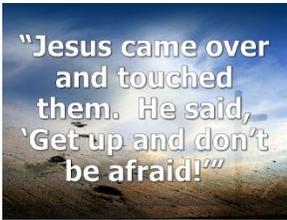
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.



In this passage we gain a sense of how Jesus is eternal. Jesus has been present since the creation of the world, will continue to be present until He one day returns to restore heaven and earth, and will then reign forever. This Jesus that is eternal is also present and He calls us to join Him in His ongoing work in the world. Jesus was there in our faith beginning, when we first experienced living in a relationship with Him. And now, He begs us to continue on the journey. Lucy Worley, in the same article from Relevant magazine, writes about this:

Beginnings are a wonderful thing, full of excitement and wonder. However, the journey itself is what any good story is all about. We don't love Lord of the Rings simply because Frodo left the Shire. And we don't enjoy the story of Narnia because a little girl named Lucy stumbled into a wardrobe. What stirs our hearts is their perseverance until the ring is destroyed and the White Witch is defeated.

Mountaintop experiences are wonderful and beautiful, but our faith is so much more than just these moments. Our key verse for today is verse seven: "*Jesus*



came over and touched them. He said, "Get up and don't be afraid!" Jesus says the same to us. Don't long for what was, don't cling to that feeling you once had, don't live a safe and comfortable faith. Instead, Jesus says don't be fearful, get up

and walk. Walk boldly in the faith, trusting in Jesus. As Lucy wrote, "*the journey itself is what any good story is all about.*" Our faith consists of these story moments all along the journey. What we will become is yet to be seen. So we journey forward.

We journey alongside a Jesus that we know is everlasting, eternal. 1 Chronicles

16:16 reads, "*Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.*" From the beginning, to now, and forever on into the future, God, with Jesus at His side, reigns. For us, whatever comes next can be hard. For one, it



raises up fear to just begin the journey; for another, it is scary to seek that next mountaintop; and, for others it is difficult to be willing to risk for another. But Jesus promises to be with us. He is our eternal promise. In Matthew 28, verse 20, Jesus said, "*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" This is our everlasting hope as we journey forward, getting up over and over, walking by faith, casting aside fear, knowing that our eternal Jesus has it all under control. This day and each day, may we strive to grow in our relationship with Jesus, seeking not to ask too little, but to dream big, to trust in the plans He has for us. May we always seek to be His hands and feet, ever used for His glory in this world. May it be so. Let us pray.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) When have you most felt in God's presence? How has this experience helped your faith as you have continued the journey?
- 2) What 'mountaintop' experiences have you had? Was it at camp? On a retreat? In a small group? In worship one morning?
- 3) Why is it challenging to continue to seek the next mountaintop, to continue on towards what it is really about – the journey to grow closer to God?