

Matthew 17:1-9: ¹And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁵He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

“God Does Great Things on Mountains”

INTRODUCTION

When we think of mountains we usually think of beauty, ruggedness, grandeur—and above all majesty. When I was a boy, my parents would often go to Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado for a day trip. You could park and hike a trail to one of the mountain peaks in the park—nearly 12,000 feet above sea level—and gaze upon majestic mountain peaks all around you. It’s hard to describe unless you’ve actually been there.

Mountains can be beautiful places—and they can be dangerous places, too. On February 10th, a Colorado man was literally blown off one of the Rocky Mountain National Park trails by a 90 mile per hour gust of wind. The wind carried him 8 feet over and 20 feet down the side of the mountain, dropping him hard on the rocks below. He broke a lower leg in four places. Fortunately he was hiking with a friend and who called 911. After five grueling hours, he was off the mountain and in an Estes Park hospital.

Mountains figure predominately in Holy Scripture. Think about all the times when God appears to His people on mountains. In Genesis chapter 22, God told Abraham to take Isaac to one of the mountains of Moriah where he was to sacrifice his son. But there on that mountain God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. In Exodus chapter 3, God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush on Mount Horeb. You may know Mt. Horeb by its other name, Mt. Sinai. Forty years later, in one of the great theophanies of the Old Testament, God would appear on Mt. Sinai in fire and smoke, and there he would give Moses the Law.

Our Old Testament reading takes place at that event on Mt. Sinai. Before God had given the Law to Moses, the people of Israel gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai—fresh from their deliverance from Egypt. There, Moses consecrated the people with the blood of the sacrifice, and then Moses and the Elders of Israel ascended the mountain and ate and drank with God, as Moses records for us: “And [the Lord] did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.”

After that, Moses ascended into the mountain to receive God’s precious Law. Moses described his Mt. Sinai experience like this: “Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

Later in Israelite history, Jerusalem and the temple came to be known as Mt. Zion. Jerusalem was built on the crest of several mountains—and the temple itself may have been built on the very spot where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac—on one of the mountains of Moriah.

When travelers came to Jerusalem, they had to go up to get to the city—and once in Jerusalem, they had to ascend to get to the temple.

In the New Testament, the Gospel writers record that Jesus often went up into mountains to pray. Luke records that on the occasion of the Transfiguration, Jesus had taken Peter, James and John with Him to that mountain to pray.

The Mount of Transfiguration reveals much about Jesus. There the disciples saw Him in His true glory as the divine Son of God. They were both “eyewitnesses” and “earwitnesses” of His majesty. They saw His face gleaming like the sun, with clothes as white as light. Then they saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus—living proof of the resurrection and eternal life with God in paradise.

So awe-struck were they by what they saw, that Peter blurts out, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

But then they heard a Voice proclaim: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Their eyes saw and their ears heard the majesty of the Christ—the very same majesty we will see on the day of Judgment.

There on the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples fell down in fear—the fear sinners have when they find themselves in the presence of Holy God. Matthew writes, “⁶When the disciples heard this—that is, the voice of God—, they fell on their faces and were terrified.” Prior to this, Peter was all caught up in the excitement of what was happening. But once God spoke, this wasn’t such a great mountaintop experience, anymore. As the cloud overshadowed them and the Voice spoke, they were terrified.

That scene takes us back to Mt. Sinai and the awe-full, terrifying presence of Holy God. God’s Law reveals His holiness and our unholiness. We’d like to silence the Law—but we can’t. It reveals our adulterous thoughts, our greed, our lies, our jealousies, our sexual misconduct, our

love of self over love of neighbor. When God reveals His Law—whether it’s on Mt. Sinai or from the pulpit or from the Holy Spirit’s convictions—we are reminded of our sinful condition and like Peter we are silenced. For there is no excuse—the Law shows us that we deserve every ounce of God’s wrath.

As long as God’s glory and holiness are hidden under the flesh and blood of Jesus, Peter and the disciples are fine—like Moses and the elders of Israel in our Old Testament reading. But when God’s glory is uncovered in all its majesty, sinners are doomed like that hiker when that 90 mile an hour wind struck him down.

But there’s another mountain in the New Testament where God does great things. We get a glimpse of that mountain from afar in the Gospel reading. Matthew writes: “⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ ⁸And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. ⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, ‘Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.’”

After Jesus touched those fearful disciples—and took away their fear, He said, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” And here we get a glimpse of the most important of all the mountain of God—Mount Calvary.

On Mt. Sinai, God gave us His good and perfect Law. But the Law is a curse for those who cannot keep it. It shows us that we are not perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. But on Mt. Calvary, outside the gates of Jerusalem—on one of the Mountains of Moriah—God gave His Son as a substitute for us. The perfect sacrifice for people who are not perfect—the innocent sacrifice that makes sinners righteous before God, through the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus knew He couldn't stay on the Mount of Transfiguration in all of His majestic glory because He had work to do. And that work was to go to Jerusalem, suffer and die—to bear the punishment we deserve for sin on Mt. Calvary. So that rather than being filled with unholy fear in the presence of God, you can stand in God's presence without fear—having your sins washed away by His blood, reconciled to God by His body on the cross.

And that brings me to another mountain where God does great things—the Mt. Zion of the New Testament age, the Church. The Church is that mountain where the healing touch of Jesus is administered every time His people gather to worship Him.

Yes indeed, here in the Church, the Law of Mt. Sinai is proclaimed in its full sternness. The Law is used like a medical diagnostic tool—an MRI or a stethoscope—to reveal a problem. An MRI might reveal that you have a brain problem, and a stethoscope might reveal that we have a heart problem. But the Law always reveals that we have a sin problem.

Now I've never heard anyone curse an MRI machine or a stethoscope for revealing a problem with their bodies—in fact, they rejoice that the problem was discovered so it can be treated. But people curse the Law all the time, because it reveals sin—it reveals that we can't stand in God's holy presence and live. The Law of Mt. Sinai shows us that we need the Gospel of Mt. Calvary.

And here at Mt. Zion, the Gospel of Mt. Calvary is proclaimed in all its sweetness to show you that God provides the cure for sin—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, here on Mt. Zion, God does His work of revealing sin and revealing the Savior from sin. And here on Mt. Zion Jesus does His work of healing hearts burdened and broken by sin with His forgiving touch. That touch comes to you in the absolution, the proclamation of the

Gospel, the singing of our hymns, the speaking our prayers, and the gift of the Lord's Supper. So, on this mountain—Mt. Zion—the Church—Jesus comes to you to touch you personally with forgiveness—to restore your relationship with God—to clothe you with His righteousness—so when the Day comes for you to stand in God's holy presence, you can do so without fear, as a loved and forgiven child of God.

This is the proper attitude of worship. We gather on Mt. Zion each week not for what we give God, but for what God give us: The gifts Jesus won on Mt. Calvary—the grace to be His Holy People, the power to keep His commandments, and the promise that because of sins forgiven, you will eat and drink in His holy presence now and forever.

CONCLUSION

God does great things on Mountains. On Mt. Sinai, He gave us His Law. On Mt. Calvary, He gave us His Son. And on Mt. Zion, He gives us Law and Gospel—to show us our sin and to show us our Savior—the only Savior who touches a people broken by sin and the Law's condemnation with the forgiving touch of His grace in Word and Sacrament.

In Jesus' name, Amen.