

The Ultimate Mountaintop Experience

2 Kings 2:1-12 & Mark 9:2-9

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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2 Kings 2:1-12 (NIV)

¹ When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. ³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁴ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” And [Elisha] replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho. ⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” he replied, “but do not speak of it.”

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” And [Elisha] replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on.

⁷ Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied. ¹⁰ “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours — otherwise not.”

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.

Mark 9:2-9 (NIV)

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There [Jesus] was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) ⁷ Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” ⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The Ultimate Mountaintop Experience

It was a rough year for the small coal mining community. Coal mining is difficult, dirty work under the best of conditions, but with the country moving to cleaner and cheaper sources of energy, like natural gas and solar energy, the coal miners were beginning to see the handwriting on the wall. One miner expressed his frustration like this: “My life is filled with mountaintop experiences. One day, I’m on top of the mountain. The next day the mountain is on top of me.” We understand his pain.

The Bible refers to numerous mountaintop experiences. Some of the time people in the Bible felt they were on the mountain. Other times they felt that the mountain was on top of them.

It was on Mount Moriah that Abraham felt God was calling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham surely felt at that moment that the mountain was on top of him, but then God opened his eyes to a ram caught in a thicket and soon Abraham was on top of the mountain (Genesis 22).

On Mount Sinai Moses received the Ten Commandments. Certainly that was a mountaintop experience! But when he came down from the mountain the people were in rebellion. They had cast a golden idol in the shape of a calf and were indulging in all manner of vile practices. Now the mountain was on top of Moses (Exodus 32).

On Mount Carmel, Elijah had his great contest with the prophets of Baal and won a spectacular victory. He was on the mountaintop! But soon he was on the run thanks to wicked Queen Jezebel, and ended up hiding in a cave where he felt the weight of a mountain on his shoulders (I Kings 18-19).

Our Lord was certainly acquainted with mountains. One of the temptations of Christ took place on a high mountain (Matthew 4:1-11). Temptation can find us anywhere — whether high on the mountain following a warm and wonderful baptismal or other high spiritual experiences — or deep in the valley of doubt and despair.

After the temptation experience Jesus had other memorable experiences on mountaintops. It was to the Mount of Olives that Jesus retreated for prayer — it was also the place where He was betrayed.

And who can forget Christ’s Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7? While we do not know from the Bible exactly where Jesus delivered this most famous of all His sermons, evidence suggests it was on a mountain near the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum, the fishing town located on the northern shore of that sea.

Important events often happened upon mountains in the scriptures. And certainly today’s lesson from Mark’s Gospel is the ultimate mountaintop experience.

Mark tells us this event took place soon after the experience at Caesarea Philippi where Peter proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah and where Jesus told His disciples plainly that He “must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again (Luke 9:22).”

The disciples were both shocked and confused. This wasn't what they thought would happen the day they decided to drop everything to follow Jesus. Simon Peter especially was annoyed with Christ's announcement, and never having cultivated the good sense of knowing when to keep his mouth shut, he let Christ know about his disgust with this announcement.

So when Jesus called His inner circle, His closest friends, Peter, James, and John, to go with Him up on the mountain, their heads were probably still reeling from that announcement. Perhaps they thought that, in the rarefied air of the high mountain, their minds would clear.

However, there was no way the disciples could have prepared themselves for what took place on that mountain. For one thing, when they got there, they saw a sudden change come over Jesus. He appeared in a brilliant light. As Mark tells it, "His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." The disciples knew Jesus was special, but they had never experienced anything like this. Jesus was transfigured right in front of them.

I love the way Pastor Leith Anderson describes it: "Think of a woman living in your apartment building," writes Pastor Anderson. "Every time you've seen her she has been bundled up in heavy winter clothes. When you first met her she was changing a flat tire and there was thick black dirt all over her hands and clothes and face.

"Then one day you see her on television. Instead of grease she has make-up on her face. Instead of winter work clothes she has an expensive designer dress. Instead of living in the apartment down the hall she is the CEO and majority shareholder of the holding company which owns the apartment building and a thousand others like it. She is on television because she is announcing her acceptance of the President's nomination as Ambassador to the Court of St. James in London. You thought she was a nice neighbor but you never dreamed she was so much more.

"Think of the boy down the street who used to deliver your newspapers. The one you tipped \$5 at Christmas time. The one you haven't seen for years. The one you liked, but wondered if he would ever amount to anything.

"Now it is the day of your surgery and you are pleased that the doctor is renowned as one of the best in the field. He walks into your hospital room, and he seems vaguely familiar. He introduces himself as your former newspaper boy from down the street. You are shocked. You see the resemblance. You recognize his voice. You can hardly imagine that it is the same person. You wish that you had tipped him \$50 instead of \$5. No, those comparisons aren't good enough!

"Actually," concludes Pastor Anderson, "I don't think anything compares. [The disciples of Jesus] saw Him as they had never seen Him before and wouldn't see Him again until they were welcomed by Him into heaven."

And then, as if that weren't enough, the disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah on that mountain. Moses, you will recall, gave the people the Ten Commandments and led them to the Promised Land. Elijah the prophet was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. The Jewish people believed that Elijah would return one day in the same way he had departed, on the wings of a chariot.

These two men, Moses and Elijah, represented the Law and the Prophets, the sources of authority in Jewish life, and here they were standing there on that mountain with Christ.

In case you haven't noticed them, there are stained glass windows of Moses and Elijah positioned on each side of the front entrance to this church. I am sure their images and that location for those two windows didn't just happen by chance. I believe the one who put them there was thinking very theologically, remembering the importance of these two from the Old Testament, their appearance with Christ on the mount of Transfiguration, and the two unnamed witnesses, who many believe are these two, from chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation.

What with the appearance of Christ speaking with these two, this was surely the ultimate mountaintop experience! For once, even Simon Peter was nearly speechless. Mark tells us Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Then Mark adds parenthetically: "He did not know what to say, they were so frightened." Mark knew we would understand.

Then, if all this wasn't enough, Mark tells us, "a cloud appeared and covered them, (that cloud would be what Jewish Rabbis term "the Shekinah glory of God" God's appearing here on earth), and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!'"

Chances are that even if they had not been listening to Christ before, they would be listening to Him from this day forward! Wouldn't you? If you had experienced such an extraordinary event, wouldn't you conclude that you had better give Christ your undivided attention?

THAT IS WHAT CHRIST WANTS MOST FROM US, ISN'T IT — OUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION?

"A voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!'" What difference would it make in your life and mine if we really began listening to the Master?

The late Chuck Colson once told of being invited to preach at San Quentin Prison, an opportunity he greatly looked forward to. Three hundred of the 2,200 inmates had agreed to come to the chapel to hear him. What an opportunity to preach to a large group of men who truly needed the Gospel. Surely God meant for him to be just where he was.

But just days before his arrival, officials at San Quentin uncovered a hidden cache of weapons, and the prison was immediately locked down with inmates confined to their cells.

What a disappointment! Only a handful of men were able to be present for Colson's address, and, for the most part, they were already Christians. In despair Colson thought he might just give a short devotional, ten minutes or so, then move on to his next appointment. It is really difficult to preach with passion for a long time to such a small group.

He really thought God had brought him to this place. Now he was uncertain. And then he spotted a video camera in the far end of the room. Perhaps, he thought, this is being recorded for the chapel library. Maybe I'd better give it my all. And he did. He preached with great fervor, as though a thousand inmates were listening.

Later he mentioned his disappointment over addressing so few of the inmates to the prison chaplain. “Didn’t you know?” asked the chaplain. “Because of the lockdown, the administration agreed to videotape your sermon. They’ll be showing it to all the inmates tomorrow on closed-circuit television in the morning and again in the afternoon.”

In fact, that sermon was aired not just twice, but nearly a dozen times over the following weeks. Because of the lockdown, not just three hundred but all 2,200 prisoners heard the gospel. Because Colson listened to Christ’s voice and stayed faithful to his task, God used that opportunity to reach prisoners who would never have dreamed of attending a chapel service. It is never a mistake to listen to Christ’s voice and to obey that voice.

WHEN WE HEAR JESUS CALLING US AND ARE OBEDIENT TO HIS VOICE WE DISCOVER A MEANING AND PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES WE WILL NEVER FIND ANY OTHER WAY.

Well-known pastor and seminary professor Tom Long tells about a newcomer to a church who one evening attended a church supper. He found himself sitting next to an older man. They started to talk, and the newcomer learned that the man had been a member there for 25 years. This was a university church near Princeton, NJ, with a lot of academic people in it.

The old man said, “I’m the only nonintellectual left in this church. I haven’t understood a sermon here in 25 years.” The newcomer asked, “Then why have you stayed?” “Oh, I would never leave this church,” he said. “What keeps you here?” the newcomer asked.

The man then explained that every Monday night he and others from the church took the church van to the youth correctional center to visit young people in prison. “We started this a long time ago.” The newcomer asked, “Why do you do it?” Thoughtfully the man answered, “Because Christians are supposed to do that kind of thing. I guess that’s why I’m here.”

The old guy may not have understood a sermon in the last 25 years, but it wasn’t the voice of the pastor he was listening to. It was the voice of Christ telling him to serve a group of young people in prison. And evidently he received more of a blessing from this ministry than any of the young prisoners. “Oh,” he said, “I would never leave this church.” When we hear Christ calling us and are obedient to His voice we discover a meaning and purpose for our lives we will never find any other way.

BUT, YOU MAY ASK, WHAT IF I THINK I HEAR GOD’S VOICE, BUT I’M MISTAKEN? WHAT IF I END UP SOME PLACE WHERE I AM TOTALLY UNSUITED?

God will tell you soon enough. The far greater risk is that you will never commit yourself to any meaningful ministry and will end up missing out on one of the great privileges God has given us.

There is a classic story about a king of Bavaria in the eleventh century named Henry III. King Henry became tired of his responsibilities as king. He wearied of the pressures of international politics and the mundane worldliness of court life. So he made a major life decision. He made an application to the leader of a local monastery to be accepted there to spend the rest of his life in prayer and meditation.

The monk to whom he applied responded, “Your Majesty, do you understand that the pledge here is one of obedience. That will be hard for you since you have been a king.” “I understand.” Henry said,

“The rest of my life I will be obedient to you, as Christ leads you.” The monk responded, “Then I will tell you what to do. Go back to your throne, and serve faithfully in the place where God has put you.” After King Henry died, this statement was written in his honor: “The king learned to rule by being obedient.”

The three disciples were on the mountain with Jesus when He was transfigured. “His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” And they saw their Master, and ours, in the company of the two great leaders of the Jewish faith, Moses and Elijah. Then they heard a voice: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!”

Peter, James and John did listen to Jesus’ voice and we revere their names to this day. Listening to Christ and obeying His leading is the key to a satisfying and effective life.

Mark closes his report of this experience on the mountaintop with these words, “Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.” Jesus was all they had, and Jesus was all they needed! When they gave Christ their undivided attention, their lives were filled with His power and their witness touched the entire world and is still touching it today. Let me ask you. Are you listening? Will you be obedient?

When we hear Christ calling us and are obedient to His voice we will discover a meaning and purpose for our lives we will never find any other way. Don’t hesitate to answer Christ’s call on your life. It is the only path to true happiness.

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