

## Wrong Mountain

Transfiguration Sun. – 02/19/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 17:1-9 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 7-8, **“But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”**

### **Introduction**

✘ Gideon Lasco, a physician and medical anthropologist by profession, is also an avid mountain climber who has climbed over 150 mountains in the Philippines. On his website he writes of a recent climbing trip where his group was attempting to climb Mount Malipunyo. After consulting with some locals, they took what they thought was a shortcut, but after about an hour they realized that they were on the wrong mountain.

→ It sounds kind of comical, doesn't it? “Oops, I climbed the wrong mountain!” But it's more common than we might think. In fact, we like Peter in today's text – when we consider the truth of God's Word before us today may come to see ourselves on a mountain where Jesus does not want us to stay.

✘ The first part of the Transfiguration story tells us about an amazing hike that Jesus took with three of His disciples. Verses 1-3 says this, “After six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him.”

→ Throughout Scripture God uses mountaintop experiences to reveal Himself and His mighty; even saving work to His people. Here we have Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Each one of them have powerful mountain-experiences with God beyond the event in our text today.

✘ So let's take a quick look at those mountains and see what we can learn:

### **I. God used mountains to reveal His salvation plan.**

✘ In our Old Testament Reading we heard how God revealed His Law through Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:12, 15–18).

→ Now, some 1450 years after Moses was buried by God in an undisclosed grave, we are told that Moses “appeared” with Jesus before the eyes of Peter, James and John as Jesus is transfigured and shining with the glory of Yahweh on the mountaintop.

→ Why Moses? Because it was through Moses on Mt. Sinai that God gave His perfect Law to His people. Remember, it is God's Law – His Ten Commandments and other Laws through which God shows us that we are all sinners to the core; that because of our sin and rebellion we are all condemned not only to die, but also to receive eternal separation from God in hell. Left to our own devices, our future is hopeless even as it is 100% deserved. So, Moses shows every one of us how desperately and fully we need a Savior.

✘ Now what about Elijah? Why is he with Moses and Jesus on the Mountain some 875 years after he was led by fiery horses and chariots in a whirlwind up to heaven? (2 Kgs. 2)

→ Well, remember how God revealed His power through Elijah on Mt. Carmel in defeating the false prophets of Baal by consuming that water-drenched sacrifice and altar of stone with fire from heaven? (1 Kg. 18:19, 36–40).

→ So it is on that mountain, through the prophet Elijah that God revealed His supreme power, presence and victory over any and all other so-called gods created by the imaginations and desires of mankind and this world. God used Elijah and his spiritual successor John the

Baptizer – often called the “second Elijah” to point to Jesus as the crowning glory and final fulfillment of God’s plan to save all condemned and sin-filled souls.

- ✘ So Moses reminds us of our problem as sinners and Elijah reminds us that the answer to our problem is, and forever will be the One and only true God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- ✘ And now on the mountain in our Gospel Reading today Yahweh reveals the fullness of His glory in His Son, who is the final fulfillment of His salvation plan. This is not however, revealing that Jesus is “like” Moses or Elijah, but it is instead Moses and Elijah who point the eyes of all God’s people past, present and future to see that Jesus alone is Yahweh God in all of His eternal power and glory, right here in human flesh and blood before Peter, James and John on that mountaintop, and before you and me in Word and Sacrament today!
  - ➔ You see, this mountaintop-display comforts us and assures us as Christians that, in Jesus, God really has come to live with us.

## **II. None of these mountains completes the revelation.**

- ✘ And yet, we must not fall to the same temptation and misguided notion that Peter did and think that these mountains represented in Moses, Elijah and even the transfigured Jesus are the completion of God’s revelation and plan.
  - ➔ The Law, though it is crucial to our salvation in showing us our sins and our need for a savior, cannot be the mountain of salvation. Why? Because in our sin, none of us can ever live up to it, even though Peter wanted to pitch a tent for Moses and stay there in the old covenant.
  - ➔ No, the Law is the wrong mountain – because the Law exposes all of the hurtful words that we have so proudly – and not so proudly – shouted from the mountaintops. It reveals all of our innermost thoughts – the ones that we’d be ashamed to have uncovered by the light of truth. And it shines the spotlight upon our corrupt and sin-soaked actions, even the ones we may think of as praiseworthy, so that we see how far short they fall from God’s perfect Law every day.
  - ➔ So, Moses’ mountain; the mountain of trying to save ourselves by following God’s Law is always the wrong mountain.
- ✘ Likewise, trying to climb and pursue the mountain of power, as we saw it with Elijah on Mt. Carmel ends up as a dead-end trail.
  - ➔ Peter let his adrenalin get the best of him, thinking that with Moses and Elijah he was hobnobbing with the big shots. And so he wanted to pitch a tent for Elijah too so that his connection with God’s flashy power could go on and on.
  - ➔ But alas, power is the wrong mountain as well, although we often work ourselves to the bone trying to get up on top and in control of everything and everyone else. We pursue our own personal influence in office, school, neighborhood and even church politics; in seeking popularity with friends; in trying to dominate members of our own families, and more.
  - ➔ But the truth is, as God teaches us in His Word, we are all pathetically weak in the end. Gaining power over sin, death, and the devil is something we can never attain; another false summit.
- ✘ And as Jesus shows us in our Gospel today, even the mountain of glory can be deadly. Actually it’s more accurately a cliff that brings certain death.
  - ➔ When Peter wanted to pitch a tent for Jesus we see how much he craved staying there to bask in the glory of the transfiguration.
  - ➔ But glory is the wrong mountain. Even though we dream of fame and fortune; playing the lottery or literally going up the mountain to gamble; even as we spend money right and left to

have the latest and flashiest fashions or the fastest computer or phone, or the best landscaping on the block or the largest nest-egg in retirement, Jesus humbles us, just as He did His disciples – bringing us back down from that mountain and telling us as He did in verse nine, “Tell no one...” of these kinds of glory, because our dependence upon earthly glory is just one step away from death. A false mountain so deceptive that even Peter, “the rock” fell for it.

### III. There is one mountain that reveals salvation.

- ✘ There is though one mountain that reveals, and from which God dispenses salvation itself. Just before Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mount of Transfiguration, in Matthew 16:21, we see Him giving them directions to the “right” mountain. We’re told that “Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”.
  - ➔ It is the mountain after which this congregation is named, Mt. Calvary; where God displayed how far He would go to forgive our sin and save us! Those other mountains have their purpose. They serve as tools through which God teaches of our need for a savior; of His power to gain for us the victory, and of the true glory of His Son, but it is only on Mt. Calvary, that eternal salvation was earned for the souls of all mankind, once and for all!
- ✘ Verse eight tells us that the three disciples, led by Jesus, as I read it literally from the original Greek, “lifting up their eyes they saw nothing except Jesus Himself alone!”
  - ➔ Yes, Jesus is shown to be the only One able to deal with sin. Only Jesus lived this earthly life without even one sin and thereby fulfilled God’s perfect Law. Only Jesus has all of the power of God to overcome and conquer Satan and his false deceptions and demonic attempts at keeping us in hell with him. “Jesus Himself alone” and no other lives and shines every day with the full glory of God.
  - ➔ He’s the one who saves you and me from the sin of climbing up and living on the wrong mountain.
- ✘ And His glory shined its brightest in what many of our world think of as the exact opposite of glory; when He was raised up and hung nailed to the cross on Mt. Calvary; when He died and was buried in a borrowed tomb, and then He was raised again from death on the third day to fulfill God’s plan of salvation.
  - ➔ The world may refuse to see it and believe it as God’s mountain of salvation. Many did in Jesus’ day and many more refuse to listen still today. But refusing to reckon with the cross on Calvary means that the power and the glory of God will be lost to those souls forever.
  - ➔ And that is why the Father so clearly boomed His voice from the cloud that day, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him” (v.5).
  - ➔ “Listen to Him” and Him alone, that’s what Jesus’ disciples; that’s what you and I must do right now today! Listen and believe and receive the necessary sequence of the cross before the resurrection, both for the Son of God and for the salvation of your very own souls.
  - ➔ For it is by grace through faith in “Jesus Himself alone” that your sins are forgiven; that you have His undeserved gift of life!
  - ➔ Jesus is the one and only mountain; the only voice of truth. We do not add to or subtract from His way to salvation. We know and believe that all of Scripture points to Him; every word, even those other mountaintop events point us to see Jesus.
- ✘ Letting go of our earthly attractions to those “wrong” mountains; not depending upon our emotions or our human reason or even the so-called human “experts” and authorities, I know, can be scary.

→ Even while they were in Jesus' presence, verse six says that the disciples "fell on their faces and were terrified" at the sound of the Father's voice of truth.

→ But notice that Jesus is the one who "came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear'" (v.7). "Jesus Himself alone" is the One who takes the fear away for us, whatever that fear may be; whether it's the fear of coming down from this world's "wrong mountain" or the fear of losing popularity or influence or power because you believe in Jesus, or the fear of sin and death itself, Jesus raises you up in the water of your baptism and joins you to His death and resurrection today and forevermore in the glory of eternal life with Him!

## **Conclusion**

⊗ Yes, in Jesus, we know that we are on the right mountain.

→ Gideon Lasco and his group decided to climb "mount unknown" that day. And he noted that very few people climb it because there really is no spectacular view from its summit.

⊗ So it is that the people of our world so often stubbornly insist on climbing the wrong mountains in this life, and in the end they find that what was promised as spectacular or grand ends up being nothing of substance to see.

→ But you, the people of God; you have been brought by "Jesus Himself alone" to Mt. Calvary. And you now see His glory in the salvation He won for you. Amen.