

“Mountains and Valleys”  
Mark 2:2-9

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Ah, to be on the mountaintop—in the presence of Jesus—in the presence of God—far away from the troubles of this world—far away from the monotony of everyday life.

Retired Presbyterian pastor David Leininger puts it this way:

*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, 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.*  
*"O Lord, carry me away to the mountain," might be our prayer.*

Wouldn't it be wonderful to spend all of our time on the mountaintop? But then we remember—our ministry is with those who need our help down in the valley.

A man once testified in one of D. L. Moody's meetings that he had lived "on the Mount of Transfiguration" for five years. "How many souls did you lead to Christ last year?" Moody bluntly asked him. "Well," the man hesitated, "I don't know." "Have you saved any?" Moody persisted. "I don't know that I have," the man admitted. "Well," said Moody, "we don't want that kind of mountaintop experience. When a man gets up so high that he cannot reach down and save poor sinners, there is something wrong."

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him, and there he is changed—transfigured – dramatically before their eyes. The author seems to struggle to find the right words to describe what happens. Jesus' clothes, he reports, became dazzling white, adding, "... like no one on earth could make them." It's as if he is saying, "No, you don't understand, it's whiter than white, whiter than it is possible to be." And then, two other figures appear alongside Jesus—and not just anybody—but two of the most important figures from Judaism's past, thought to be long dead—Moses and Elijah. Moses representing the God's Law to the Jews, and Elijah, representing God's Prophets to the Jews. These two men comprise the foundation of Jewish history—and the Jewish covenant with God. And, here they are, bathed in a glorious light, talking with Jesus.

What would you do at a moment like this? You probably don't have a clue—I don't have a clue—Peter obviously didn't have a clue, so he blurts out the first thing that comes to mind—"Hey, why don't we build some tents, so we can camp out, and stay here for a while?" Now,

his suggestion isn't really as misdirected as we might assume. The Jewish celebration of Sukkoth—otherwise known as the Festival of the Tabernacles—is still celebrated today. It is a celebration anticipating the time when the Messiah will come and bring the entire world under God's rule. For someone with a knowledge of Jewish tradition, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, along with the transfiguration of Jesus, could certainly be perceived by Peter as the sign for this event, so he offers to build them booths. Perhaps this is the only way he make sense of this mysterious and startling experience.

But, as we have learned about the impulsiveness of Peter, he is off the mark. God has other plans. Just as Peter stops speaking, a voice from heaven both announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved." and then commands, "Listen to him!" God not only identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but then he impresses upon Peter—and the other disciples—that this isn't the culmination of Jesus mission, but that he still has more to teach them. Pay attention to him!

Do we sometimes do the same thing? We pray to have that moment when we can know that God is really with us. We want an encounter with God so that we might know, without a doubt, that we are not alone. We want something more than just assurances—we want something that we can see and touch. But, like Peter, when we are faced with that which we seek, in those very moments that God lifts the veil between us and the divine, we find ourselves scared, uncertain, and struggling to make sense of an experience that is unlike anything we have ever experienced before.

Such is the nature of the "Mountaintop Experience." Why are we so afraid of this encounter with God? Well, as much as we seek such a connection with God, perhaps we are also apprehensive as to what that encounter might mean for us. Do we sometimes fear the presence of God because of the fear that we might be changed, transformed, expected to move outside of our comfort zone? The Old Testament is full of examples of normal, everyday folk having an encounter with God—and leaving that encounter transformed.

It is impossible to experience the presence of God in one's life, and not leave that experience changed—and we do fear change. Those things that were once important to us are now not so important. Our priorities change. The way we see ourselves, and the way we see other people changes. Our goals shift. We dream new dreams of the way the world could be, instead of being content with the way the world is.

But, perhaps the scariest thing of all is coming back down off of that mountaintop and, with a completely new perspective, facing the same broken world that we climbed the mountain to escape. Just like the man confronted by D.L. Moody—we can't do the work of God by remaining on the mountaintop. We have to come down into the valley and use that which we have learned to bring a taste of God's kingdom into the world.

You may be familiar with Peter Jenkins, author of the best-seller "Walk Across America." He decided to walk across the U.S. to find out what life was all about. It is a powerful image—even the movie "Forrest Gump" did a parody of his epic quest.

Something great happened to him during his travels, something he never anticipated, he was

given faith! While traveling through Alabama he came across a huge revival. He decided to attend, and at some point, God's Word grabbed him. When the invitation was given to become a Christian, Jenkins walked down the aisle.

He heard a lot of people trying to explain to him what just happened. He heard words like: "Born again...", "Saved...", "The Lord led you here tonight...", "Praise the Lord...", "Ain't God good?"

Mary, the woman who first spoke to him, said "Peter, this great elation that you're feeling now—You are feeling great elation, aren't you?" "Yes," Peter replied. (Well), "at this moment it may seem like these great feelings are going to last forever, but they won't," she told him. "Being a Christian is not based on feelings. You're on a mountain top now, but someday, sooner or later, you'll be far away from these great feelings. You may even wonder if all this ever happened.

"Your Christian walk is based on faith, not feelings," Mary explained. Peter had never thought about that. As he put it, "I was so thrilled that there could be good feelings mixed in with faith that I really didn't care about her opinions."

More than twenty years have passed since that revival. "I was on a mountain top that night," Peter reflected. "The feelings lasted a long time, but that mountain top hasn't lasted all these years. Maybe I've been on more mountain tops than some, but I've also climbed, sometimes crawled, out of some awfully steep valleys, too."

A man is climbing a mountain, at the top of which he hopes to find God. By ascending the heights, the seeker expects to leave all the cares and miseries of life behind in the valley.

But while he climbs, God is coming down the mountain into the toil and grief. In the mists of the mountain God and the man pass one another. When the man reaches the mountaintop, he will find nothing. God is not there.

What then will he do? He knows the climbing was a mistake, but in agony of that recognition, will he fall down and despair? Or will he turn to retrace his path through the mists and into the valley to where God has gone seeking him?

We never know where that encounter with God might occur. We may be diligently seeking it, or it may sneak up on us when we least expect it. It may be a glorious, spine-tingling event—or it may be just a still small voice telling us deep in our soul that we are being set apart for special service to God. But, that isn't the end of it. To validate that encounter with the Holy, we need to act on it. And we can't do that by attempting to preserve the moment or hiding it away in our heart. Just as Jesus came down from heaven into our broken world, and Jesus directed his disciples to leave the mountaintop and venture back into the valley of human suffering, we, too, must follow God's call to bring God's love and grace to a world so badly in need. AMEN