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The Mountain and the Valley

Have you ever been on the mountain? I know that might seem like a strange way to begin a message, but I'd like for us to consider it this morning. Have you ever been on the mountain?

For just a moment, let me tell you about my "mountain" and maybe it will make more sense. I'm not going to tell you where this is, or when it happened. I just want you to visualize it and to see if you can put yourself in my shoes for a moment. Imagine a large church in a Midwestern city. From a distance, the most noticeable thing about it is the bell tower. This is a church that holds very deep and personal meaning for me. It was in this church that I heard the Gospel purely, and understood it, for the first time. This is where Jesus became real to me. My faith was affirmed in so many ways here. The bell tower in particular became a place of devotion for me. I used to pray underneath that bell tower. Prayers for guidance, for direction. In those moments, God seemed so very close that I could almost touch him. I never wanted to leave that experience.

Now, you've probably realized at this point that I'm not talking about a literal "mountain." Sooner or later, most people have an experience or moment in which everything they believe about God, Christ, and salvation is affirmed. This is an experience that fills you with a deep understanding that what you believe is true. This is an experience in which God seems close, present, and real. Have you ever had an experience like that? During these "mountain" experiences, the troubles and problems of the world seem like distant memories.

So now I'll ask again. Have you ever been on the mountain?

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus has taken his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, up to the mountain, but in this case, it's a very real mountain. And in a way, all of the disciples have been having one continuous "mountain experience" for a while now. As I looked at the text for this morning, it struck me that they've been on a roll leading up to this point. They've seen Jesus calm a storm with just his voice. They've seen demons come out of people, they've seen Jesus heal the sick, raise the dead, feed 5000 people on two loaves of bread and some fish. They've seen miracle and wonder, one after another, and all of this culminates with a huge, indescribable revelation from heaven on top of the mountain of transfiguration. So how do you think the disciples are feeling at this point? How would you feel if you were there with them, on the mountain?

Do you think their beliefs are affirmed? I think so. They've long since suspected that Jesus is God's promised messiah, and here, all of the events and miracles have led to a revelation beyond their wildest dreams. Elijah and Moses, there with Jesus. Jesus glowing like the sun. God's voice from heaven telling them that this is his son.

Do you think God seems close, present, and real to them? Again, I think we would have to answer yes. God reveals himself in a very clear way on top of this mountain. Peter, James, and John hear God's voice of all things! Real and audible! That doesn't happen every day.

Do you think the problems and troubles of the world seem far away to the disciple? Absolutely! Here's Jesus, glowing with all the power of heaven. Moses and Elijah are with him, and God the Father announces that this Jesus is his son! "Nothing can stand against Jesus!" they must have thought. "I'm glad that we're with him."

And so what do they do, after seeing Jesus with Moses, Elijah, radiating like the sun, there on the mountain? Peter wants to stay, of course! He pipes up and volunteers to build lodging for Moses, Jesus, and Elijah, just so they can stay on the mountain for a little while longer. To bask in the experience.

And that's the thing about mountain experiences. We don't want to leave them behind. We want to stay in that experience. Just like Peter, James, and John, we want to stay on the mountain.

But there's a problem with mountain experiences, isn't there? Not that they're bad in themselves. They can strengthen our faith, sustain us in times of weakness. But sooner or later, we have to come down from the mountain. Sooner or later, we have to enter the valley.

The valley. It's a familiar place for some. Even David writes in that familiar Psalm "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." The valley. The valley is that place where instead of being affirmed and strengthened, your beliefs are challenged. Perhaps you even begin to doubt them. The valley is the place where instead of present and real, God seems distant, uncaring, unloving. The valley is that place where you feel devoured by the problems of this life, instead of them seeming far away. For every mountain experience that we have in this life, there's a valley waiting in the shadows. The disciples would find this out soon enough.

The disciples would enter the valley the night that Jesus was betrayed. Can you imagine what they must have felt?

Is Jesus really God's messiah? How could he be? He's being humiliated, ridiculed! Called a blasphemer!

Does God still care about us? He's turned his back! He's turned his back on Jesus, and on us! Jesus, our friend, our Lord, is bleeding.

Dying on a cross. Cursed by God. Where is God now?

What kind of troubles do we have now? Plenty! Our leader is dead. We're probably next. We've wasted our lives, our time. What will come of us?

You see, this is what the valley does. The valley is a dark and difficult place, but it's a place that at some point, all of us have to pass through. Perhaps you're in the valley right now. The diagnosis of a life threatening illness can be a valley. It can challenge your faith or make you feel like God is uncaring. The pain of divorce can be a valley. The troubles and worries that come with a broken marriage can seem overwhelming. The loss of a job can be a valley. In that moment, it's difficult to feel like God cares, or that faith is of much value then and there. While we often wish that we could stay on the mountain just a minute longer, the valley is a place that we can't wait to leave.

And yet, even in the valley, there is still hope. Listen carefully. Whether you're standing on the top of the mountain, or walking through the valley, Jesus is Lord. And this is the point of the account of transfiguration. In this moment, on top of a mountain, Jesus was revealed to his disciples, and to us, as Lord of heaven and earth. This is a man that even the great heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah, recognize as Lord. And when we confess that Jesus is Lord, what are we actually saying? What we're saying is that he's the one in charge.

But it gets better. Jesus isn't just "Lord" in some obscure or abstract sense. Jesus is your LORD. He's in charge of you. So is he an uncaring or unloving Lord? Is he a Lord that doesn't understand or doesn't care about the valleys in this life that we go through? Not at all. Jesus is the Lord who did not remain on the mountain, but came down into this valley of a world and took on flesh and blood to walk through your valleys with you. Your heartache. Your divorce. Your job loss. Your

illness. Your Lord did not remain far off, but suffered the pains and hurts of this life, just as we do. Our savior and Lord cried tears like ours, bled blood like ours, and faced trouble, heartache, and pain, just as we do. He gets it. He gets it, and he cares for you, far deeper than you probably understand. So whether you're on the mountain or in the valley, when you confess Jesus as Lord, your faith is affirmed. The one in whom you put your trust is the Lord and Christ who not only walked through every valley that you could ever walk through, but conquered them by dying and rising from the grave. Jesus, your Lord, is the only one with enough strength to conquer the valley of death. Death could not hold him. You may say "This is all wonderful, but what does this do? For me? Here? Now?" Yet, even in your doubt, Jesus is with you. The truth is, sooner or later, you will have trouble. The world, the devil, and your own sinful flesh will bring you temptation, trial, and suffering. But take hold of God's promise that in Jesus Christ the devil, the world, and our sin has been overcome. And this Lord of heaven and earth, the one in control of all things, is Jesus Christ, your friend and savior. Through mountain and valley, may our eyes and hearts always remain firmly fixated upon him, our strength and our Lord. Amen.