

Matthew 17:1-8
Moments and Movement
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3-2-14

There are definitive moments in life when things become unmistakably real. Last week, we looked together at the story of Elijah who was discouraged, finding himself under a Broom Tree, being called by God to get up and go to Mt. Horeb. And it was there that God came to him in a question: what is the meaning of this Mountain? It was there at Mt Horeb that Elijah was reminded in the depths of his own discouragement that the mountain was, for him, the definitive embodiment of God's faithfulness. Horeb is another name for Sinai, and it was to Sinai that God brought a discouraged and disheartened nation and gave them the 10 Commandments—a physical representation of his abiding commitment to Israel. In the midst of a time in Elijah's life when he felt like the walls were closing in around him, the mountain was the place God brought Elijah to remind him that all was under control.

Today, we meet another man who, like Elijah, is passionate for the Lord, and it just so happens that today's story also involves a mountain.

Jesus brings Peter along with two others, James and John, up a mountain to make himself unmistakably real, and give them undeniable direction. Have you ever experienced a moment in your life that was so meaningful and profound, one that literally changed your entire paradigm? Maybe the birth of a child, or a breathtaking vista on vacation, or perhaps the news that you got the job you longed for. There's something inside us that wants to capture and savor these moments forever. This is what Peter wants, as well.

But that isn't always how God works, is it? Milestones give way to new movements in life. They are the things that simply keep us moving in the direction God has for us.

So I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles, either the one you brought with you or the one in the pew rack in front of you, to Matthew chapter 17 beginning at verse 1. And if you are following along in the red pew Bibles, it can be found on page 17 of the New Testament.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." He was still speaking, when lo, 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." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. 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.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these words, inspire them now in our hearing as well. Amen.

If Elijah was discouraged, Peter was ambitious. Scripture tells us that a week ago when Peter is asked by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter gets it right: “You’re the Messiah, the son of the Living God.” But just a few moments later, when Jesus tells his disciples that the road to the Kingdom will take them through Jerusalem and will involve the cross of Calvary, Peter pulls him aside and says, “Not on your life, Lord.” To which Jesus replies, “Get behind me Satan.”

Have you ever felt like Peter was a particularly relatable character? He has great intentions, he knows the right answers, he’s been to Sunday School, he loves the Lord, he’s eager to be used, and yet Peter often finds himself just confused. I bet more than a few of us know something about that. Maybe you committed yourself to a relationship, or a job, or a community effort. You thought long about it, prayed about it, started to get really excited that this would be something big in your life. And then when you began down that road with Jesus, it didn’t turn out the way you hoped, and so you’re left sort of confused and wondering where things went wrong and why God didn’t see it through with you.

When you get to those points in your lives, when your hopes and ambitions are stopped in their tracks, it is time to let Jesus take you to the mount of transfiguration.

When Jesus brings Peter and the others up this mountain, all of a sudden Jesus was changed before their eyes. His face shown like the sun. His clothes became dazzling white, and he was seen talking to Moses and Elijah. And Peter was like, “Alright, this is what I’m talking about.” For Peter, this was the Savior he knew Jesus could be, and this was the Savior he had been waiting to be revealed. Peter’s ambition, Peter’s longing was for the glorious and radiant power of Jesus to be seen in an unmistakable way. And here it is.

So what does he do with this moment? He memorializes it. Peter says, “Lord, this is fantastic, stay right here just the way you are and I’ll build us some tents for us to stay right here together. Let’s make this moment last a lifetime.”

We do this, too. When we see something unmistakably real and beautiful, what do we do? We try to capture the moment by building a monument to it. Our nation is full of structures that were built to capture particular moments in time, and the people who embody them. Why, this very building is, in a sense, a monument. There was once a time in the early days of this community when the Holy Spirit began to do something new in the lives of people here. There was a need for the gospel to be proclaimed and the children to be educated, and so to capture the movement in that moment, what did they do? They built a monument to it. And we’re sitting in it.

The other way we memorialize moments is with photos. Recently, my daughter Annie celebrated her first birthday and Christian has his third birthday this Friday. And one of the things I've frantically tried to do as a father is to capture the milestones of their lives through photographs. And thanks to the beauty of digital photography, I no longer need to purchase film, change canisters, and take it to a lab to have it processed. No, I can take hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures and see them all right now. But as I was scrolling through last year's photos, I realized something profound: for every photo of my children like this one (show clear focused picture of kids), I have 3 or 4 like this (show fuzzy photo of kids).

Something happens when we get caught up in trying to capture a milestone in history, in a sense it loses some of its awe. The danger of memorializing the moment is that we miss actually being present in it. And this is what happens to Peter. He is loving what's happening right now and he really doesn't want it to end. But in wanting to put up tents for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses to reside, he is in danger of missing the purpose of the mountain.

Throughout the Old Testament, God offered glimpses of himself to Israel to keep the promise fresh. Moses saw God's backside and it blew his hair back. Elijah was taken into the cleft of the rock and heard the voice of God. Isaiah and Ezekiel were taken up into visions in which they beheld the presence and the Spirit of God, and the unimaginably great things God was doing. Why? So that they could keep the dream, keep the hope, keep the mission alive. These men see Jesus, not because they struggle to believe – they already believe – but to have their hope rekindled. You see, they weren't given special access because they were special. No, they were given these glimpses of the unimaginable glory of God so that they could then continue to lead the people into new horizons with God.

So in this moment, in which Peter is so confused and star struck, God comes with an audible voice, only the second time in the Gospel where the Father is audibly heard, and God speaks. "This is my Son, the beloved...listen to him." This isn't a moment to be memorialized; this is the very Son of God, the Logos, the Word, the one who was in the beginning. This man is the one who was with the Father and the Spirit and together fashioned the entire cosmos in the beginning, and you're trying to take a picture. Behold the man, recognize his presence, and then praise him, worship him in his splendor. And that's what they do when they realize it; they're overcome by fear and awe and they fall down on their faces.

But do you see what Jesus does next? He reaches down his hand and when look up, they see only Jesus. No longer do they see him as the iridescent, glorious figure who does not reflect the glory of God, but literally emanates glory himself. All they see is the man. They see the one who called them out of their fishing boats, called them out of their old lives into a new purpose. Jesus made himself undeniably divine to them so that they might go down from the mountain and make Jesus undeniably real to others.

We were never meant to live only on the mountaintops. Mountains are great, but if all we ever do is try to replicate life on the mountain, do you know what life will be like? It will be like my attempts to take pictures of my children, fuzzy and just a split second too late. Why? Because Jesus is on the move, Jesus doesn't stay up on the mountaintop, so why should we? If we are truly followers of Jesus who seek to grow more closely as his disciples, people who share the hope that where Jesus is going will ultimately lead to his overcoming death on another mountain—this one with a cross—then the place where we meet Jesus may not be up high, but down in a low place.

We can't just go from mountaintop to mountaintop, because feelings and experiences are fleeting. They aren't the basis for life. CS Lewis' *Mere Christianity* puts it plainly: *You cannot make an experience the basis of a whole life. Feelings are good, but they are still feelings. Now no experience can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge lasts, principles last, habits last, and I would add, actions last.*

Jesus takes them down the mountain because that is where God's great glory meets the world's great need. This week signifies the beginning of the season of Lent in the Christian Church. It's a season where we journey with Jesus in a reverent way, a penitent way. We aren't made to live only on mountaintops; it's down in the valley where we practice glory-reflecting. And the place where these two worlds meet is around the Lord's table. In just a moment, we will gather at Christ's table and experience a little piece of the Kingdom of God breaks into our everyday world, and it transforms us. It changes us. It transfigures us. Christ comes TO us, right where we are, and right AS we are.