

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, February 7, 2016**

## **MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS**

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

There is something mystical about mountains. For all of recorded human history those who have searched for God have sought Him in the mountains of the earth. Why this is so, it's impossible to say. For some, thinking that God lived in the sky, the mountains made sense as the places closest to where God lived. For others, not so certain that God can be confined to a specific location, mountains are simply isolated places to get away from the roar of humanity to an enveloping silence where the still, small voice of God can be heard with the ears of the heart.

For Jews and Christians, mountains are places where God has chosen to work on countless occasions in the life of His people. From Mt. Sinai to Mt. Carmel, from Mt. Nebo to Mt. Zion, the story of God and Israel seems to move from one mountain to another. So much so has this been the case throughout the recorded history of God's people that our language even has a phrase to express it. We refer to the "mountaintop experience." That's one in which God makes His presence and His love unmistakably known to those to whom He has chosen to reveal Himself.

One such occasion took place on a mountain to the northeast of the city of Galilee. This mountain, Mt. Hermon, is close upon Caesarea Philippi and a place not far from where the events of Chapter 16 of Matthew took place. I'd like for us today to go to that mountain and to do so by taking a look at Matthew, Chapter 17.

The context for this story, of course, is what immediately precedes it. In Matthew Chapter 16 Peter and the other disciples are gathered around Jesus and He poses a question to them: "Who do people say that I am?" They told Him about the various answers that people gave to that question. Then He asked them point-blank: "Who do *you* say that I am?" In verse 16 of Chapter 16 Peter replies: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus blesses him and tells him that this is a form of revelation, that he could not have known this on his own but that the Spirit of God has revealed this to him. He then goes on to tell them about the church that would be founded upon the rock of this confession of faith and He then goes on to tell them what he would have to do. He would have to go to Jerusalem, He would be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, He would suffer, He would die and then He would rise again. Peter, in his impulsive way, burst out and said: "Lord, that would never happen to You." To which Jesus gave His memorable response: "Get behind me, Satan, because you are not thinking of the things of God but of the things of men." And His rebuke of Peter and His declaration that not only would He bear the cross, but His disciples would bear the cross as well. We see in this exchange not only a mountaintop of confession as Jesus is recognized for who He is, but we see them deep in a valley of rebuke, in a valley of sin, in a valley of selfishness.

Following the time in the valley, they went to a mountain. Six days later, according to verse 1 of Chapter 17, Jesus took with Him His inner circle among the disciples – Peter and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He led them up a high mountain by themselves. It is thought by many scholars that Mt. Herman is where He brought them, because it's the highest place in all of the area of Israel. There, we are told in plain and perhaps not crystal-clear language, that He was transfigured before them. We don't know exactly what that means, what they saw. I think it's fair to say that this is something that Hollywood special effects could not have captured. Nevertheless, something happened and the vision that they had of Jesus was changed in a moment. In a moment, we're told, His face shone like the sun and that His clothes became as white as the light. And of course white, as a color, and the sun in its brightness are usually associated with God. So the picture that we get is that whereas before them One stood in front of them that they confessed as Messiah and confessed as the Son of God but still saw as a human being, now they saw Him as more than just a human being. Beyond a shadow of a doubt He was more than just an earthly Messiah. He was more than just a teacher. He was more than just a healer or a miracle-worker. The One who stood before them now had revealed to them His divinity. Not that they looked upon the face of God. They still saw the face of Jesus. But in Him they saw God unmistakably.

Then they saw something even more remarkable, at least to an earthly mind. Not only did Jesus reflect the awesomeness, the glory of God, but behind Him or with Him were standing two figures more than centuries dead! They saw Moses and they saw Elijah, and I'm sure it must have occurred to the three of them: "How is this possible?" Moses was a man dead over a thousand years. Elijah a man taken up into heaven eight hundred years before. And yet here they were, standing on this mountain next to Jesus. Somehow or another they recognized them. They knew who they were. Peter says explicitly in verse 4 that he would respond to this by putting up shelters. He says that one would be for Jesus, one would be for Elijah and one would be for Moses. He knew somehow who they were. There's no indication that Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Simon Peter, I'd like to introduce you to my friend Moses and my friend Elijah." There are no formal introductions mentioned here. Peter knew who they were.

The two of them there were representatives of the law and the prophets. Moses of course the law-giver of Israel, the one to whom the tablets had been given on Mt. Sinai, the one who was known as the law-giver, even though it was God from whom he had gotten it. And Elijah, counted as among the greatest if not *the* greatest of the prophets, even though he never wrote anything. We don't have a book of Elijah, but what we have are the recorded deeds of Elijah, the way that he stood for God against the prophets of Baal. For the people of Israel he was symbolic of those who had spoken to them on behalf of God. Together, these two men's presence on the mount of transfiguration was a symbolic way of pointing to the fact that the Jewish scripture pointed to Jesus as its fulfillment. The law pointed to the One who was now transfigured before them. The prophets prophesied about the One who now was transfigured before them. Indeed all of God's word had looked forward to this time when God would invade the world and would be incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of a woman and come into the world for the salvation of His people.

Well, Peter's response to that, I suspect, was to be petrified. We're told later that they were, indeed, terrified when God spoke, but I imagine even before that that there was a great deal of fear involved. Part of the reason I say that is because of Peter's response, which was, quite frankly, inane. Peter's response is baffling. What exactly did he have in mind? "Lord, it's good that we're here. This is a wonderful thing to be up on this mountain and be faced with the glory of God. I think the proper response to that is for me to build a shelter for the three of you, because it might rain at any moment and the sun's beating down and we wouldn't want you to get overheated." What is this about? I don't know. For him to say it was good to be here would be like later this evening Cam Newton saying to the reporters, "You know, it's nice that we won the Super Bowl." Can you picture that? Fill in the blank – Tom Brady or Peyton Manning or Eli Manning in years past. These guys have been there, they're in front of the press, they've just won the championship of North America, because as we all know they don't play football in the rest of the world. But they've won the Super Bowl and they say, "This is nice. This is good. I'll enjoy this. And now I'm going to Disneyworld." No. They jump up and down, they scream at one another, they hug one another, they pour Gatorade over the coach's head. They celebrate this as being a high moment in their lives.

The truth of the matter is, once you've won the Super Bowl, if you don't ever win it again, the rest of life is all probably just downhill. What's the big thrill? You've had your big thrill. And Peter's like, "Wow, it's good to be here! And I think we should stay here." Change the metaphor slightly. It's as if Cam Newton or Peyton Manning – in the unlikely event that that happens – telling the reporters after they've asked 60 or 70 questions and kept them there for an hour and a half, say: "Let's keep going. I'm having a terrific time. I think we should just continue this all night." They're not going to do that. They're going to go out and get champagne dripped on their heads. They're not going to sit there and listen to reporters. But Peter wants to stay. And you can imagine why he'd want to stay. He's confronted with the glory of God. He wants to capture this moment. He wants this moment to go on forever. He's in the presence of two of the greatest figures in the history of his people, right there in front of him. Imagine the questions he could ask them. "Moses, how could you put up with those people for all those years?" Questions like that. He wanted to capture this moment. He wanted to stay there. So he offers to build what in Greek are called *skene*, literally "habitations." He's not going to put up a lean-to. He's going to build the Taj Mahal for them. At the very least he's going to build them a three-bedroom ranch with a garage. The kind of thing you could move into and just stay there for a while. He wanted to stay where he was because deep down I suspect he knew that the next step was to go back down the mountain, to leave behind the glory of God, to leave behind Elijah and Moses and their witness, to plunge back into the world. To plunge back into everyday stuff. To go back to the world where you have to make a living and you have to provide for a family, you have to fix the roof when it leaks, you have to please your boss, you have to take tests in school, you have to pay bills and taxes, you have to face the opposition of the world. Who wouldn't want to stay on the mountain under those circumstances?

We've all, I suspect, at one time or another have had something we might characterize as a "mountaintop experience," a time when we felt like we were touched by God. And in a

way that simply doesn't compare on a day-to-day basis, we thought that this is what it's all about and this is what I want to grab hold of and stay in.

Back in 1994 I was granted one of those moments at a world mission conference that the Moravian Church had in Florida. I don't remember what was done at the conference particularly. That wasn't what it was about. For me it was about worship. The worship that week was led by people from all over the world. The various provinces of the Moravian Church, particularly those in Central America and Africa, took a leading role in our worship, which meant that rather than it being staid and German and American, it was boisterous and it was lively and it was dynamic singing and it was the word of God proclaimed in all of its truthfulness. One experience after another. In a way I felt like you haven't lived till you've been to a service led by Tanzanian Christians. It was wonderful.

But it wasn't even just the worship because in the middle of one of those services we were in the middle of a song, I couldn't tell you which one it was, and I had an overpowering feeling. That's a terrible word. It doesn't really convey what I want to convey but it's the only one I can come up with. I had an overwhelming feeling that God had healed me of something. I wasn't sick at the time. What I had was an illness that I had been carrying around for years and years and years and that illness was anger at my parents. For a variety of reasons I don't need to go into here I had been angry in one way or another, one expression or another, at my parents for a long, long time. The year before they had come to see us in Winston-Salem and spent a week with us. During that week I discovered the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Because that's what it felt like! At the end of that week they didn't speak to me for five years after that. When they left and they made clear they weren't going to be speaking to me any time soon I rejoiced and said, "Thank you, Lord. I've been trying to get rid of these people my entire life and now they've voluntarily done that. Isn't this wonderful?"

I know there are people who really do have that response to their parents after a terrible childhood. I know that. But the truth of the matter is I had a lot less cause than most people to feel that way. But the truth is that I was mad at them and I was perfectly happy to not be speaking to them. What happened in the middle of that conference, in the middle of that worship service, all of a sudden, without my doing a thing – I wasn't even thinking about it at the time – it just came over me and I realized that I was no longer mad at my parents. The very first thing I thought was: "What's that got to do with what's going on here?" Then I realized that it didn't have anything to do with what was going on. It was an act of God over which I had no control but which had changed me. Eventually my parents and I reconciled with one another before they died and we were on good terms. But that wasn't something that I did but I have to tell you, it felt good to have that burden lifted off my shoulders. I had no idea how heavy it was. That burden had been weighing me down for decades and when it lifted it was like I could see life in a completely different view.

I did everything I could to hold onto that. Needless to say I did not miss another moment of worship that week. Because I just knew that if I went to worship that week and joined

in and got as “oomphy” as my Tanzanian and Guatemalan and Honduran brothers and sisters that God would keep me in this place. But guess what? It wore off. By the end of the week I still felt pretty good but I wasn’t up on the mountain anymore. I had started to come down. I got on a plane and I went back to Winston-Salem and I dealt with a cantankerous congregation and a senior pastor that I didn’t get along but just so well with and my daughter who was 13 – I don’t need to say anything more about that. Just all the stuff of the world.

I looked back a few weeks later and I thought what happened to that? And I realized something that Peter must have known instinctively would happen. When you go down the mountain and you get re-involved in all the stuff of this life, that mountaintop feeling fades. But there’s a reason for that, and I think that verse 9 gets it across. As they were coming down the mountain Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen. This was a holy moment. And yes, one day this story will be told but for the time being keep it to yourselves. You’ve seen something extraordinary. Hold onto it. Share it when the time is right. Don’t tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” Because when the Son of Man is raised from the dead that’s when the mountaintop becomes permanent and not just in feeling. It’s not something you can capture with tents or with buildings. It’s not something you can capture emotionally. But the mountaintop, once He is risen, becomes permanent in every one of our lives. But before we can get there what has to happen? Before Jesus can rise from the dead He has to suffer and be rejected and be tortured and be killed.

The story of the transfiguration is a story of Jesus showing us who He is and telling us what He is about to do. And in the process showing us who we are. We are people who, like Him, are going to live in the valleys. We’re going to live in the valleys of crying children and obnoxious bosses and demanding teachers and argumentative in-laws and not enough money and a government that wants more. We’re going to live in that valley and there’s no way, short of becoming a hermit on a desert island, that we’re going to get away from it. Even on the desert island you still have to make a living, even if it’s only gathering coconuts.

But the mountaintop now is also an everyday part of our lives. Because the One who was transfigured on Mt. Herman did go through the valley and now is alive forevermore. So that even in the midst of the valleys He is there with us.