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Mark 9:2-9

Heaven in the Valley

There's nothing wrong about wanting to see a piece of heaven, wanting to feel God so close and wonder so near. The good news today is that the glimpse of glory disciples see on the mountain isn't the only place where heaven and earth collide.

Wanting a mountain top experience, a little touch of the divine makes sense. We have loved ones who are in mental, spiritual, and physical pain. We wonder how we can keep up with all the expectations placed upon us by others and ourselves. We worry if we are good enough for God. We long for mountain top moments-times in which we feel delighted and amazed by the presence of the divine.

We know about mountains. Being on a mountain feels good. We can feel the wind in our hair, the sun on our face, the sky wrap around us like a soft blanket. We can sense how awesome and real God is. We also know about valleys. The places where the dust settles and the roads wind. There are some places in the valley where we don't feel as safe as we do on the mountain. No wonder we want to stay on the mountain; no wonder we want to stay there as long as we can. As soon as we're back in the valley, we find ourselves daydreaming about the "good times." We say, "If only I could go back and stay."

This thought seems to be in Peter's heart as well. When on the mountain with James, John and a changed Jesus that's dazzling white, Peter wonders how to stay on the mountain. Peter says, "Teacher, it is good for us to be here. Let's make three memorials-one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter wants to make a place for these holy people to dwell on this glorious mountain forever.

Then a cloud overshadows them and a voice booms, "This is my Son the Beloved; listen to him!" Just a few days earlier, Jesus rebuked Peter for saying that Jesus did not have to undergo suffering and death. Jesus let the crowd and the disciples know that "If any want

to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35.) God the son has already rebuked him and now God the Father is trying to get Peter to truly listen to Jesus. Before Peter can understand what’s happening, the cloud disappears, the voice becomes silent, and Moses and Elijah disappear.

As if nothing spectacular just happened, as if heaven did not just collide with earth, they go back down the mountain. And as they travel Jesus commands them to not say a word about this until “after the Son of Man has risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9). Once back in the valley, Jesus heals a boy with a demonic spirit. Jesus predicts his suffering one more time and the disciples remain perplexed. Then James and John, two of the disciples who witnessed the transfiguration on the mountain, argue over who’s the greatest. Jesus explains that ‘whoever want to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

If suffering is important and if we’re not supposed to make a memorial on the mountain, then what are we as Christians supposed to do? If we are not called to stay on the mountain, then where exactly are we called to go?

We don’t know the specific answer, but one thing seems clear. Our time on the mountain is not meant to stand alone, but alongside going down the mountain and serving in the valley.

A young father lost his brother and sister in one year. His mother was not in the best health, so he and his wife tried to find a house with a basement apartment. In the midst of finding a new home, grieving, and raising a toddler, this couple did the best they could. About a week before they were about to move into their new home, the man’s mother died. In a year and a half, three family members died. Talk about a valley. The man’s wife made one call to a friend. Within a day, twenty-five friends packed and moved everything from their old home to their new one. They grieved with and for them. And there was no doubt that God was there, that the tears of thanks from the young couple

were dazzling light. Yes, they were in the valley of the shadow of death, but God was there.

A student is in the “slow” track at school because he can’t read. His main classroom teacher thinks he is stupid and other students make fun of hi. The main classroom teacher does not know that this seven year old actually excels in one area of reading-comprehension. Since he can’t pronounce the words on the page, he’s sent to do the same drills day after day after day. Imagine the moment when the resource teacher, the one who is supposed to go over the drills with him everyday, names his strength. Imagine that moment in the small room with horrible lighting where she looks into his eyes and says, “I am proud of you. You are so skilled at understanding stories. Maybe you can help me teach my other students about our story for next week.” Suddenly the room isn’t so dull, the day isn’t so long and the light from his smile dazzles the whole room.

Brothers and sisters, to follow Jesus means to be willing to leave the mountain. Following Jesus is about seeing what he sees in the valleys-pain, sickness, and the dignity of every human being. This way is a hard way- the way of the cross. Yet the way of the cross is also the way of peace. The way of the cross is along the path on which we will have glimpses of the living God, dazzling in all of Christ’s glory.

So you see mountains are not the only place where heaven and earth collide. The kingdom of God that is already unfolding is in the valley, too. As Mother Theresa says so poignantly, “we have it in our power to be in heaven with Him at this very moment. But being happy with Him now means: Loving as He loves, Helping as He helps, Giving as He gives, serving as He serves, rescuing as He rescues, being with Him twenty-four hours, touching Him in his distressing disguise.” Being in heaven is about being with Jesus in the valleys, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.