

Coming off the Mountain

There's something special about a good hike. It feels good to be out in God's creation, enjoying the fresh air. Recently I went to the western part of the state, and hiked Mt. Mitchell. It was awesome! The climb up was challenging, but not overly difficult. But the best part about the trip was the timing. Going in September, the clear view from the top of the mountain was full of all the colors of fall. It was breathtaking. Many months later, I still have that view engraved in my mind. This hike, this mountaintop experience, was a good thing to do, and I dare say, necessary for me to get out and enjoy God's creation.

And in our gospel reading for today, Jesus also had a remarkable mountaintop experience. He took his closest friends, Peter, James, and John on a hiking trip to pray. And on the mountaintop, the text says that, "the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah." Talk about a memorable hiking trip. This was the mountaintop experience for these disciples, with the greatest view in all creation, Jesus, fully displaying his glory with the two great prophets, Moses and Elijah standing by. It's certainly better than any view that Mt. Mitchell has to offer. Peter's response is genuine, and heartfelt: "Master, it's good that we are here."

And, this is our response for how our Lord comes to us in worship every Sunday. Church, the public gathering together of believers in Christ around his Word and Sacraments, is the mountaintop experience for our Christian lives. Of course, like the disciples, there are times during worship that we all, myself included, might become bored or heavy with sleep. Hopefully not in the middle of this sermon. But, it is amazing

that we can, in fact worship in the house of our heavenly Father. It's amazing that Jesus, the Lord of all creation, comes down to us in his Word and in his sacraments. It's amazing that the Holy Spirit gathers us together in faith, sanctifying us in this earthly pilgrimage. This is, I dare say, a necessary experience for us as Christians. It's where the Word of our God, his promises of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are continually engraved on our hearts. It's good that we are here.

Now, here's a question I have for you all hear today: What are other mountaintop experiences you've had in your life? What are significant, rare, good experiences that you've had in your life? Maybe it's cheering on when your favorite sport's team wins their championship game. Maybe your mountaintop experience is sitting on a beach, with the warm sun shining down on you, and a pitcher of margarita's close by. Mind you, these experiences feel good! Really good. So good that we might not want them to end.

And this is the problem that our good friend Peter runs into. He doesn't want to leave the mountaintop. Peter looked around, saw what was going on, and wanted the moment to last forever. He says to Jesus, "let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter wanted to stay there so much that he was willing build three homes on top of a mountain. He was the guy on the hike that can't tear his eyes away from the view. He's the guy at church who stays overnight and sleeps on a pew. He's the guy on the beach vacation that doesn't want to return home. I can't say I blame him.

Do you ever feel like you'd rather stay on your mountain? If somehow, every experience, every conversation we've ever had, every part of our life, was truly enjoyable, and meaningful? Maybe it's because we don't want to go back to our day to

day lives. Maybe we fear the sin, the brokenness that waits for us there. Dwelling on a meaningful workplace project you participated in instead of the endless pile of forms in front of you. Dwelling on a marriage ceremony instead of working in the relationship as it stands today. Dwelling on when our bodies might've been stronger and healthier than what they could be now. Dwelling on a time when we truly felt God working in our lives, instead of the spiritual desert we might find ourselves in today. We can become easily fixated with these mountaintop experiences, wanting those moments to linger for as long as they can. Peter has plenty of company wanting to prolong the moment.

But, Jesus didn't stay there. He came off the mountain. He had work to do. There were more people to heal, more sick to cure, the dead to raise. Jesus came off the mountain, for you. He went back and experienced day to day life, fully embracing all the sin, all the brokenness in our lives. In fact, this incredible mountain story was pointing to another hilltop. The reason why Jesus went there, why he sought the counsel of Moses and Elijah, why this mountaintop experience happened in the first place, is this: Jesus needed to confirm what he knew would happen to him. The text says, "and behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." They talked about his death. If Jesus stayed there, in this mountaintop experience, forever like Peter wanted, he couldn't continue his mission. Jesus couldn't have died for you. He needed to come off the mountain. Jesus's purpose for being on earth is not found in the mountaintop experience of transfiguration, but on the hilltop of Calvary. The king on a cross, fully embracing all of our brokenness. The Lord of all creation suffering and dying for you, bringing you a new life, new standing before God, by forgiving you of all your sins. It's the greatest view we will ever see.

And, just as our Lord came off the mountain, needed to come down from his mountaintop experience, Jesus invites us to come down from our own mountains as well. I'd dare say it's necessary. Imagine if I had never come back from my Mt. Mitchell hiking trip. While that view was certainly really good, I had to come back to my life here. I had to continue on in my corner of creation where God wants me to be. If your mountain is a beach, while the beach is definitely a good place to be, you need to come back home eventually. In the same way, there is more to being a Christian than this Sunday morning mountaintop experience.

Living as a Christian involves Monday too. But Jesus is the one working within us. It's not like he takes a break for the rest of the week. Our Lord, Jesus, is dwells within you, He's engraved on your heart. He works through us, in our corners of creation, in our callings in life. You are how his glory, his presence, is revealed in the world today. Jesus sends us out as his little Christs, shaping and molding his creation. Not just in miraculous ways when we feel all caught up in the moment. Not just in the Mt. Mitchell, margaritas on the beach moments. Not just in church on Sunday. Jesus is present in that short, 5-minute conversation with your spouse. He's present in your workplace and your school relationships. That 30 second order at a coffee shop. Every conversation you have is a chance to be Christ, come down from the mountain, to all of those around you. His presence in our hearts brings us meaning in every conversation, every interaction we'll ever have, in every aspect of our lives. It's good for us to be here today in worship. Let's take joy in coming off the mountain, revealing Christ's presence to the world around us. Amen.