

## Jesus Takes Us From Mountain to Mountain

Have you ever noticed: it seems like there are a lot of mountains that play an important role in God's story of salvation? After the flood the ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat (Gen 8). The Lord showed Moses the Promised Land, and then Moses died and was buried by the Lord, on Mt. Nebo (Dt 34). King Saul, the first king of Israel, died on Mt. Gilboa (1 Sam 31). Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, until the angel of the Lord stopped him, on Mt. Moriah (Gen 22). And Mt. Moriah is the same mountain as Mt. Zion, where Jerusalem was founded and the temple was built (2 Chr 3). It seems like a lot of mountains also play an important role in the life of Jesus. Jesus preached his first recorded sermon on a mount (Mt 5-7). When he was tempted by Satan, the devil showed him **"all the kingdoms of the world"** from a **"very high mountain"** (Mt 4:8). Jesus prayed and was betrayed in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:36-56). He was crucified on a hill called Golgotha, which in Latin is Mt. Calvary (Jn 19:17). He ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives (Ac 1:12). And he was transfigured on a mountaintop. A lot of mountains play an important role in God's story of salvation.

Today we celebrate the transfiguration of Jesus, as we do every year at the end of Epiphany. Epiphany begins with the brightness of the star guiding the Magi, and it ends with the brightness of Jesus shining on the mountaintop. If you've ever been to the top of a mountain, you know how fantastic the perspective is. You can see for miles; you can see nearby cities and valleys and rivers and other mountains off in the distance. Today, from the mount of transfiguration, Jesus gives us a fantastic perspective, a panoramic view of God's story of salvation. And off in the distance you can see some other important mountains that play a role in that story. Be sure to look around, because today Jesus takes us on a tour. Today Jesus takes us from mountain to mountain.

And we begin on the mountain where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. We've been there for the last four weeks, and we've heard how blessed we are in the Beatitudes, how we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and how Jesus wants us to live and conduct ourselves in the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount is a very powerful message, and when Jesus finished, we're told, **"The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority"** (Mt 7:28-29). And it's that authoritative, powerful preaching that draws us to Jesus and moves us to believe in him and live for him.

But now Jesus moves us to the next mountain, the mount of transfiguration. **"[Jesus] led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."** Here the Lord peels back the curtain of heaven and gives us an otherworldly vision of the Son of God, shining in his true glory, with the brightness of heaven itself. Peter, James, and John were **"eyewitnesses of his majesty"** **"on the sacred mountain"** (1 Pt 1:16, 18). They heard the voice from heaven: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"** And today we stand with those disciples and gaze at the glory of Jesus. Take a good look at your Lord! Jesus wants us to see this glory! And then one of the most interesting things about the transfiguration is that **"Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus."** Here are these two men from heaven standing next to Jesus on this mountain. And through these men, Moses and Elijah, Jesus takes us to other mountains.

First to Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. It was a glorious and terrifying mountain. **"When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai... To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain"** (Ex 24:15-17) – a terrifying picture of God's wrath, because on Mt. Sinai in the Ten Commandments God says, "You shall do this, and you shall not do that; and if you disobey me, I will consume you with fire." The Ten Commandments are non-negotiable; they are the standard of behavior God sets for everyone. And everyone has failed to meet that standard, including you and me. So Jesus brings us to Mt. Sinai to show us his holy will, to show us our sin, to show us God's hatred for our sin, and to show us our need for a Savior.

Next he brings us to Mt. Carmel, where we find Elijah. He's the prophet that stayed with the widow at Zarephath; and the Lord made it so that her flour and oil never ran out during the drought. And when her son died, Elijah raised her son from the dead. Elijah is the prophet God carried to heaven in a chariot of fire. But on Mt. Carmel the Lord used Elijah to do something very special. In the showdown with the prophets of Baal, Elijah mocked Baal, then drenched his sacrifice with water, and then called down fire from heaven that consumed his sacrifice. That day on Mt. Carmel, everyone saw the glory and the power and the wrath of the Lord, and they realized that the God of Israel is the only true God.

Mt. Carmel, like Mt. Sinai, was a terrifying sight. On these mountains, through Moses and Elijah, God shows us his anger over sin. Which makes you wonder, what have I done to make God angry? What personal sins have I committed, or have I gotten in the habit of committing, that infuriate my holy God and Creator? Mt. Sinai shows me the law. Mt. Carmel shows me the punishment for breaking the law. So is there fire from heaven in store for me?

Well, without this next mountain, there would be. But now Jesus takes us to a hill outside of Jerusalem called Mt. Calvary, Golgotha, the place of the skull. And you know what happens here. Criminals die here. Jesus dies here, as a criminal. Here on Mt. Calvary Jesus is nailed to a cross, left to die in agony and shame. He's been up all night, beaten, whipped, punched, spit on, made fun of; the crowds are mocking him; the soldiers are taunting him. Here he looks a lot different than he does on the mount of transfiguration where he shines in glory. In fact, here on Mt. Calvary, the sun isn't even shining. It's as dark as night in the middle of the day, because on Mt. Calvary, on Good Friday, our transfigured Savior was transfixed to a cross.

But even though Mt. Calvary doesn't look glorious, if you look carefully, if you look with the eyes of faith, you can see a hidden glory. There on the cross is no common criminal. That's your Savior, saving you! That's Jesus, suffering your punishment, bearing your sin, covering your guilt, earning your salvation, saving you! God poured out all his wrath over sin on Jesus instead of you; he poured down fire from heaven on Jesus instead of you – to show you that God is not angry at you! He does not count your sins against you! He forgives you and loves you! The true glory of Mt. Calvary may be hidden behind the broken, bloody body of Jesus. But on Mt. Calvary Jesus shows us the full extent of his glory and love.

And finally Jesus takes us to one last mountain and gives us a panoramic view of paradise. The Apostle John, at the very end of the book of Revelation, says, **“He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel” (Rv 21:10,11)**. This is a vision of heaven itself. And because of Jesus, someday we will see heaven, too! From this last mountain Jesus shows us what Mt. Calvary won for us: entrance into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, our heavenly home. This city shines more brightly, more gloriously even than the mount of transfiguration, because this is where Jesus dwells with his people forever. **“The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:23)**. And someday this city will be our home, as well.

So can you see what I mean? From up here on the mount of transfiguration, you can see for miles! You can see the law of God given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. You can see Elijah and the fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel. You can see what the Christian life is supposed to look like in the sermon on the mount. You can see eternal life in heaven from the mountain in Revelation. You can see the hidden glory of Christ in the crucifixion on Mt. Calvary. And on the mount of transfiguration you can see the brilliant, shining glory of Christ. Here you get the full view, the big picture, the panoramic perspective of the landscape of God's love.

Hold onto this view as we move into the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is this Wednesday, and we begin our Lenten journey to the cross and the empty tomb. In Lent our focus is on Jesus, and his focus is on us. As you make this annual Lenten journey, remember that Lent does not end on a mountain of death. It ends in the empty tomb, and it begins with a walk down a mountain of glory. May God bless your Lenten journey.

### **Matthew 17:1-19**

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don't be afraid.” <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”