

The Ecstasy Before the Agony!

or

Thank God for Glory on a Mountaintop

Matthew 16:13-17:9

Luke 9:18-36, 51

**Sermon Preached by
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Now, when Jesus announces that some who have heard him speak about his suffering won't die until they see him in his glory, he is referring, of course, to Peter, James and John. They are the only three disciples Jesus took with him up to the glory of the mountaintop to experience his ecstasy. And they will be the only three disciples he will take with him into the heart of Gethsemane when he wrestles with his agony.

And just now, they are climbing to the top of Mount Hermon, towering high above the town of Caesarea Philippi. Picking their way through the pathless incline of weather-beaten rock, up past the sweet-smelling grasses of the foothills, they continue their relentless climb to the top when they can finally stop and find a quiet place to pray.

Once there, the footsore disciples bend double...their hands grabbing their knees...their lungs gasping for air – unaccustomed as they are to the rarefied air of the high mountains. They lean against the rocks as little streams of sweat run down their faces, sopping the neckline of their robes. One by one, they slump to the ground, their legs worn out by the climb. As they gradually catch their breath and are no longer concerned only about forcing air into their aching lungs, their eyes slowly sweep the panorama before them.

High up on the mountaintop, they are half-way to heaven...or so it seems. Thousands of feet above sea level, they are cut off from the world below. No teeming crowds. No torrents of controversy. Only clouds and sky and the soft stroke of a gentle breeze brushing past their cheeks.

The watercolors of late afternoon streak the sky, gathering at the bottom of the clouds and tinting them orange to pink to purple. To the east lie the sun-kissed plains of the Promised Land. To the west, the blue slate of the Mediterranean. To the south, the watered lushness of the Jordan River Valley as it spills forth from the Sea of Galilee.

The climb up the steep mountain has been long and tiring, and in the thin mountain air, the disciples soon drift into the oblivion of sleep as Jesus goes on little farther to pray. Unlike the disciples, however, Jesus experiences a rush of adrenaline which courses through him – maybe from the climb...or maybe from the fate he knows soon awaits him. To be sure, though the disciples don't recognize it yet, in many ways, to Jesus, it feels as if the hounds of hell have been unleashed, and having picked up his scent, are baying in hot pursuit...snarling and growling and nipping at his heels.

The adrenaline pumping through his veins tells him to either fight or flee. But the adrenaline coursing through his spirit tells him to do neither. And so he calls upon heaven for the strength he needs to face the hounds...the courage to surrender to their snarls...the daring to give his neck to their ravenous jaws.

He prays for strength to descend to the valley of suffering that he knows awaits him. Only days before, he had begun to warn the disciples...to prepare them for what was to come. But Peter, in his usual well-meaning, but uninformed impetuosity, tried to tell JESUS how it would be rather than listening to what his Lord was trying to tell HIM. But Jesus knows. As a woman

KNOWS when there is life taking form within her...as a man knows when his heart is in love...so also does JESUS know, in his heart and his soul, what awaits him when he comes down from the mountain and begins his journey toward Jerusalem and his ultimate rendezvous with suffering and death.

And so he prays. He prays for a ray of hope...a ray of light...a glimmer of glory, if you will – however distant...however dim – to help him through the darkness of the days that he KNOWS are ahead.

And as he prays, heaven answers. And the ray comes...awakening the slumbering disciples. They rub their squinting eyes in wonder. Standing before them is an incandescent silhouette, as if a blade of lightening had slashed the sky and let something of heaven spill through.

Blinding in its brilliance, the face of Jesus SHINES as the noonday sun. Seamless folds of light flow from his garments like so much fabric unfurling from a bolt of shimmering God-light.

Bewildered, disciples spring to their feet. What IS this? Is it a *dream*? A *vision*? Are they experiencing an *hallucination* brought on by the altitude and fatigue? Perplexed, but wondering, they shield their faces to protect their eyes...until the light grows so intense they not only SEE it, but FEEL it as well. Feel its power...its truth...its LIFE. And then they KNOW. They KNOW that what they are experiencing is NO dream...NO vision...NO hallucination. What they are experiencing is LIGHT...and LIFE...and TRUTH as they have never experienced it before...light and life and truth that they KNOW...in that way we ALL have of knowing when something is absolutely true...can come only from heaven itself.

Until now, the cloak of Jesus' humanity has largely concealed his identity to them. YES! He had done wonders and miracles. YES! He had enabled the blind to see and the lame to walk. YES! He had calmed the raging storms and walked on water. He had even raised the dead...Jairus' daughter and the Widow of Nain's son. But NEVER have they experienced him as they do now. Now, the cloak of Jesus' humanity is thrown off – if only for a moment – and these privileged three are given a glimpse of Jesus' GLORY...the glory of God Almighty shining ON him...and IN him...and THROUGH him.

As their eyes adjust, they see Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus as well...as if they are carrying on a conversation. They stand next to him as saints of God who have also known the wilderness in their lives...who have also endured suffering...who have also experienced the rejection of the very people they were called to lead.

How Jesus must have LONGED to step off that mountain and go with these kindred spirits – back to heaven...to return home to his Father and to the glory that was rightfully his. He could have been swept up to heaven, as Elijah had been, by a chariot of fire without tasting death. He could have been delivered from the jaws of death, as Moses had been, by a miraculous exodus.

But no chariot suddenly arrives to whisk him away from his circumstances. And no miracles come to provide a way out of his suffering. And yet, there does come encouragement and strength – which is PRECISELY what Moses and Elijah are there to provide. He who is the FULFILLMENT of the Law and the Prophets stands between the greatest lawgiver and the greatest prophet, to be filled BY THEM. Encouraged BY THEM. Strengthened BY THEM.

To be sure, Jesus needs all the strength and encouragement they have to give, for already, the reality of his suffering and death is weighing heavily upon him. And so, for him, this moment on the mountaintop is a GIFT from God...SACRAMENT from heaven...a TASTE OF GLORY that awaits him...a SIP OF THE JOY that will be his when he sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. It is his ECSTASY before his AGONY. ALL OF WHICH is meant to not only whet his appetite for those days which are to come...but to SUSTAIN him as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death in order to GET there.

Suddenly, however, the holy sacredness of the scene is interrupted by a clumsy attempt to memorialize the moment. “Oh LORD!” Peter blurts out in all of his eager enthusiasm to be a part of what he can scarcely even BEGIN to comprehend. “Oh, Lord! How GOOD it is that we are here WITH you. If you wish, I will make three SHELTERS here – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!”

But even as he was still SAYING this, a voice from heaven comes and splits the moment even as it splits the very air with its thunder...basically telling Peter to SHUT UP and get out of the way...that GOD is in charge here and that, quite frankly, God doesn't need any help from Peter in this situation!

“This is my own dear Son with whom I am VERY pleased.”

The mountain quakes with the aftershock of those words, as the disciples throw themselves on the ground in fear. But for Jesus, the words have a different effect entirely...a SETTLING effect. Even as they had given him strength three years earlier, at his baptism, just before he had faced temptation in the wilderness, so also do they strengthen him now, before he faces the tortures of the cross. He needs to hear those words. But even more than the words, he needs to hear the VOICE. That familiar inflection...that fatherly tone. So rich...so resonant...so full of eternity...and grace...and love.

Suddenly, the voice returns, directed at the trembling disciples, rending the veil of mountain air like a stab of lightning.

“LISTEN TO HIM!” the voice commands.

The command is punctuated by a clap of thunder that rolls over the disciples, driving them even harder to the ground. The message Jesus has been trying to get them to hear is a CRUCIAL one: he must SUFFER and DIE. And the disciples must brace themselves for that reality. He had told them before they climbed the mountain, but Peter refused to listen. And he would tell them again...TWICE more...in the days that lie ahead. And when it happens, they will finally understand...and grieve. Grieve for him, to be sure...but grieve for their lack of understanding as well.

As the disciples cower in the dirt, Jesus touches them and tells them to get up. Just as the sun emerges from the clouds after a thunderstorm to spread its warmth upon the shivering earth, the touch of the Master's hand radiates assurance to the trembling disciples.

“Don't be afraid,” he tells them.

As they look up, they see that Moses and Elijah are gone. And only Jesus remains. The cloud and the radiance and the brilliant light are gone. Yet JESUS remains. And on his face and in his eyes, the GLORY remains as well.

Years later, Peter and John...or someone who had learned from them...would write about what they saw that day.

“We have seen his glory,” John would testify, *“the glory of the only begotten Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

“We were eyewitness of his majesty,” Peter would one day recount. (2 Peter 1:16)

James was the only one of the three who DIDN'T record the event. Maybe he had intended to, but he was the first of the disciples to be martyred...or so tradition says...and he never got around to writing about it. And although he didn't write about the glory on the mountaintop, it is bound to have made an indelible impression upon him, sustaining him during his final hours of suffering before he died...just as it had sustained his Lord and Savior who went before him.

On that day on the mountaintop, the disciples saw Jesus in a way they had never seen him before...and THEMSELVES, as well. Before that day, they saw themselves on a fast track bound for glory...the minds dizzy with thoughts of greatness in the coming kingdom. What they DIDN'T see was that the road to glory passed THROUGH the tunnel of suffering.

Jesus asked his disciples to do, you see, was to FOLLOW him through that tunnel, which connected this life to the next. They would have to stoop to enter it, he told them, and they would have to leave everything behind to squeeze through its narrow opening.

But that's where the TRANSFIGURATION, as this event is called, fits in...and where it all begins to have meaning for OUR lives today, as well. It was and is, quite literally, meant to give Jesus...AND the disciples...and US, as well, a glimpse of the LIGHT at the end of the tunnel...a glimpse of the ECSTASY...the GLORY...that awaits us ALL on the other side. And to let them...and US as well...know that the way TO that glory is not a road AROUND suffering, but THROUGH it.

It would be the reward of not only being WITH Jesus, but also sharing his GLORY, that would give the disciples the strength to endure WHATEVER lay ahead. So dazzling was the glorious reward that whatever they had to go through...whatever they had to leave behind...whatever

suffering they had to endure...paled by comparison.

But to share in Christ's glory meant that they...and WE...must first share in Christ's suffering. The resurrection comes only AFTER the crucifixion...the exaltation AFTER the humiliation...the crown AFTER the cross.

And though Peter was slow in getting that message, he DID LISTEN that day on the mountaintop. Years later, he wrote to those who were as confused as he once was regarding the role suffering plays in the drama of redemption:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trials you must go through, as though something strange is happening to you. But rejoice that you are able to participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be OVERJOYED when his glory (and YOUR glory) is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-13)

That, dear friends, is the Good News message of the Transfiguration – the joyous GLORY that awaits us at the end. It was what Jesus HIMSELF needed to hear...and see...and experience. And those three DISCIPLES along with him. And us as well...and US as well. For it is that glimpse of joy...and bliss...and ecstasy...that is set before us ALL in the glory on a mountaintop that gives each and every ONE of us...Jesus included...the strength to come DOWN from that mountaintop and make our way through the valley of the shadow through which we must ALL walk if we are EVER to know the GLORY of the other side.

Will you join me in prayer:

Gracious and glorious Lord, help us to see and grasp and understand even the faintest glimmers of the glory you gave up when you came down from the mountaintop into the valley of the shadow of death. You could have so easily stepped off that mountain to heaven, escorted by Moses and Elijah. You could have lived out your days in the glorious serenity of the mountaintop...spending time with those closest to you...shielded from the anger of those opposed to you...sequestered from the ragged fray of humanity that fringed the streets below.

But instead you chose to descend those slopes...from the pinnacle of exaltation to the gullies of humiliation...from inexpressible glory to unspeakable pain and suffering. Down to the jeers and ridicule of those who called for your death. Down to the lashes of the whips and the spikes of that crown of thorns. Down to offer your tender wrists to those terrible nails. Down to the coldness and abandonment in the pitch black bowels of death. Help us to see, Lord of glory, that this is the ONLY path you could have taken to glory God had prepared for you...and prepares for all who follow you as the Lord and Savior of our lives.

We thank you for the glimpses of glory that were offered to us on the mountaintop, Lord, and for the privilege of seeing through the disciples eyes even the glimmers of what awaits us in the glorious light of your Kingdom. Help us to comprehend the message of the Transfiguration, we pray...a message so radiant with hope it can brighten any tunnel we must pass through...no matter how long or how hard...no matter how dark or how cold or how lonely.

At all times, but especially in times of suffering, help us to fix our eyes on you, Lord Jesus, the author and prefector of our faith, who for the glory set before you endured the cross. Help us to remember all that YOU endured so that, in those times when we must carry our own crosses, we may not grow weary and lose heart, but like Peter and James and John, find comfort and strength in the glory we see revealed in you.

In your holy name, and in the power of your Spirit alive within us and around us always, we make this and every prayer. Amen! So be it! Amen!

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