



Transfiguration Sunday

2/15/2026

Matthew 17:1-9

## A Matter of Mountains

Have you ever noticed that some of the most beautiful places in the world are also some of the deadliest? Everest. Roughly 7200 people have reached the summit. 344 have died. K2. Around 800 people have summited. 96 have died. Even close to home, Lake Tahoe even has some fatalities from ski accidents, boating accidents. Not to mention the Donner Party a little deeper in the mountains. As wonderful as all these places are, you have to be careful, or you might find yourself in a dangerous situation!

Today we join the disciples for a mountain climb. There will be danger, there will even be fear. But there will also be beauty greater than anything else we could ever possibly imagine. Try to put yourself in the shoes of these men. Their minds were racing. Jesus had done a ton of miracles, they had been inspired by his teaching. But recently things had taken an unexpected turn. Jesus had told them that he was going to die, going to be killed, and then raised again somehow three days later. Peter rebukes Jesus, and gets slammed. Then Jesus goes on to talk about how following him is like carrying a cross. A shocking statement. What does it all mean? How could this possibly be good for the people of Israel? Why are they going to the top of this mountain anyway? What does Jesus want to show them? What does he want to say?

Whatever it was they were expecting, I think it's safe to say it was completely blown out of the water by what happens next. READ.

This is a display of power unlike anything else Jesus has done in his ministry so far. The men are too stunned to speak. Finally Peter gathers enough courage to blurt out: READ. Behind Peter's words is a rather simple question. CAN WE STAY HERE? This place is good. It's beautiful. Think of how much we could learn. Think of how good it would be to just spend time together, with the Savior and these saints. I think I would have said the same thing: Can we please stay?

How would you expect Jesus to answer? Yes of course! Let's enjoy some time together! Build those tents, grab the rest of the disciples, in fact invite everybody! Bring them here so I can show them who I really am!

The answer we get instead is kind of confusing. READ.

Now God the Father appears on a mountain top too. But not with radiance and glory, but with an ominous cloud. They can't see Jesus or Moses or Elijah anymore. The temperature drops. A cold moisture is in the air and on their skin. And then a voice that thunders from heaven, and yet at the same time sounds like it's right next to them, right in their ears, says: READ. Everything about this moment would have felt intimidating, frightening even. We don't know what exactly was going through these men's minds... but I know what have been going through mine. "I don't belong here!" And it's not the first time God's presence has made people feel this way.

Take a look at Moses. When he was with the Israelites in the desert after leaving Egypt, God appeared on the top of Mt. Sinai. We heard about a portion of his appearance in our OT lesson, but go back a little further and you'll see it was a scary experience. There were trumpet blasts, fire, smoke, the people told Moses they thought they were going to die!

Or take a look at Isaiah, another prophet from the OT. At one point during his ministry, he gets an incredible vision of God's heavenly throne room, filled with angels. God's glory is obscured by a cloud of thick smoke, his voice booms. And what does Isaiah say? "Woe to me, I am ruined..."

In both of these sections God appears in a similar way. And the reaction is similar too. Terror. Fear. Why?

**Because truthfully, we don't belong here.** We don't belong in the presence of God. We are people of unclean lips. Even our thoughts are filled with sin, and darkness, and rebellion. If anyone hates his brother... If anyone looks at a woman lustfully... If you break just one of the commandments... God's presence is dangerous. It is deadly to people who are sinners. And that's all of us! If you saw God's full glory you would die! If you caught a glimpse of God's throne room, your first reaction would be fear, just like the prophet Isaiah. Because you don't deserve to see any of it.

In the moment, I really think the disciples thought they were going to be destroyed. They collapse and bury their faces in the ground. The Greek says they were *exceedingly* fearful. Terrified. The cloud disappears as suddenly as it came, but they don't even notice. They refuse to look up at all. Until... READ.

When the voice speaks from the cloud the disciples are reminded of how small they are. Of how unholy they are. Of how unworthy they are in the Lord's presence. The experience is so overwhelming they might not have immediately registered what the voice was talking about. But now, after being told by God the Father to listen to Jesus, what's the first thing that Jesus says?

"Don't be afraid."

How could Jesus possibly say that? These men are still sinners. By all rights, they *still* don't belong here. In order to be able to stand in God's presence, their sins would need to be taken away. Their entire identity would have to change! How can any of that possibly happen?

Actually, the OT already gives us some clues. At **Mt. Sinai**, the Israelites were fearful in the presence of God. But then the Lord tells them to make animal sacrifices, tells the priests to sprinkle the blood of those animals on the people. What did it mean? It meant their sins were covered over in God's eyes. **Isaiah** cries out in despair, but then God sends an angel with a coal from the altar (the place where sacrifices get made!!!!) to touch his tongue. God purifies him.

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But those moments in the OT were just shadows of what was to come.

So how could the disciples be purified? How can we be purified and changed? Is there anything that could be offered for all people that would cover over our sinfulness in the eyes of God?

Well, when the disciples look up, they saw the only thing, the only person, that could save them. They saw Jesus only.

And when they look up to see Jesus again, he isn't glorious anymore. His face isn't shining, his clothes don't blind them. He goes back down the mountain looking as ordinary as he did before. Why?

Because he isn't here to show off his glory. He's here to set it aside. Jesus isn't here to seek a crown, or honor, or power. He's here to seek people. He's here to change their hearts so they CAN stand in the presence of God without fear.

See, if Peter had gotten his request, if they had stayed on the mountain top forever, that would be the worst possible outcome for the disciples and the rest of humanity. Because we would still be in our sins. When the cloud appears, as intimidating as it is ***their eyes are directed to the One who can make them right with God. Who really can bring them into God's presence forever.***

And Jesus does that by going to the cross. He sacrificed himself. He covers you with his blood. And because of what he has done, ***you do belong in God's presence.*** The Lord loves all of us, loves you.

Because of no one except Jesus.

So when you are terrified of your sins. When you feel like a failure. When you feel as though you could not possibly be further away from God. Look up and see the same thing the disciples did. See Jesus. See the Savior who set aside his glory and his life for you. The Savior who gave up everything so you could be with him forever.

Those are the lessons the disciples learned while they were on the mountain top with Jesus.

So what did those lessons mean for them when they headed back down. Jesus goes back down the mountain and marches towards the cross. But the disciples come down from the mountain too, and in many ways, these three men are climbing back down the mountain to follow Jesus into the darkness. The rest of their lives are going to be marked by trouble, persecution, even death.

What gave them the strength to endure those things? For that, listen to another portion of Scripture, one I'm sure you've heard before. READ. That's from Psalm 23. Notice the writer never says that God zaps us right into heaven. He doesn't lead us around our problems, or under them, or over the top. He leads us THROUGH. But even though we walk through the darkest valley, we don't fear. Why? FOR YOU ARE WITH ME.

That's the other lesson the disciples learn for themselves as they go back down the mountain. There are still plenty of difficult things headed their way. The Christian life will still be about bearing our crosses. But even though we might not see Jesus physically, though we might not see his glory on the outside, we know who he is. We know he promises to be with us always. And his promises never fail.

What was true for the disciples is true for you too. Sometimes, Jesus leads us down paths we never would have chosen for ourselves. There will be discomfort, there will be pain. But we can follow him into any darkness because we know he is with us no matter what.

Sometimes the darkness comes in ways that are seemingly small, unexpected. A Christian struggling with anxiety begins to realize all the mistakes their parents made that contributed to the problems they have now. A Christian has to deal with the foolish, sinful decisions of their spouse, and don't even know where to start picking up the pieces of their broken lives. We aren't given a glorious, magical solution to those problems. Instead, we are called to forgive. You may have to create boundaries with a person who has wronged you, there may still be earthly consequences for sinful actions, but you have to turn away from the temptation to hold another person's sinful actions over their head, to hold a grudge, to let your whole life be overtaken by bitterness. It's a messy thing to forgive the people around you. But Christ is with you as you enter the mess. You can forgive because he has forgiven you.

Sometimes the darkness is gigantic, crushing. A relative is in remission from cancer... but you know it will come back some day. It feels like you are walking around with a thousand pound anvil floating above your head, and you're just waiting for it to drop. A loved one was ripped away from you way too soon, at least from your perspective, and there doesn't seem to be a reason for it. Life loses its' taste, you're just numb. Is Christ with you, even through that?

Yes he is. He never shies away from the suffering of his people. He never ignores their tears. **And though you may not get the answers you want on this side of heaven**, someday you will. And you'll get something even better than answers: you'll get to see Jesus face to face. That is what gives us the ability to join the Apostle Paul saying: I consider our present sufferings not worth comparing...

There are plenty of mountains in the world. They are beautiful to look at, the view from the top takes your breath away. But never forget that the most beautiful mountain isn't Everest, it's not in Tahoe, it's not even the mountain where Jesus was Transfigured. Instead it's the mountain where he died. That's the place where the wrath of God was paid for, the place where God revealed his love for you more clearly than anywhere else. His love will never leave you, will never stop pursuing you, in any part of your life, until one day the Savior returns to bring you to the place where you will get to see his glory and be with Him. Forever. Amen.