

On the Mountaintop with Jesus

Passage: Luke 9:28-36 | From the series: Luke

Preacher: Dan Westman ▾

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Good morning! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here. What a gift it is to open the Word together this morning. We are going to jump back into our series in the Gospel of Luke, where we find a story about Jesus and his disciples on a mountaintop.

When I was in high school, I went on a retreat with our youth group student leadership team. We spent four days canoeing down the Flameau River in Wisconsin, camping on the riverbank along the way. At the start of one of those days, they gave us some space just to spend time with God.

After hiking a little way through the woods, I found a rock that overlooked the river, and I sat down—Bible and journal in hand—to meet with God. After some time of prayer, I found myself meditating on Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3. I read these words over and over again: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine"

I started imagining and asking God to do things at my school. I started imagining and asking God to do things among my friends. I started imagining and asking God to do things in my own heart.

And I kept coming back to these words: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or imagine." And my faith and my holy imagination were blown wide open.

It's hard to describe what happened as I sat on that rock for an hour. God met me there in a uniquely powerful way. I felt more connected to him for that hour than I had in a long time — maybe ever.

This moment was one of a handful of mountaintop experiences I have had with the Lord. If you have been walking with Jesus for some time, or even if you are brand new to faith, I am guessing that you have some of these experiences as well. Moments where God's presence felt especially thick — where his Spirit felt especially real. Moments where the veil between heaven and earth seemed to grow thin, and you were filled with joy. In my youth group, we called this the *God-high*. These are mountaintop experiences with God.

But what are these moments for? What do we do when we experience such a moment? Perhaps more importantly, what do we do when we *don't* experience such a moment, even when we long to do so?

In Luke 9:28-36, Jesus takes three of his closest disciples — Peter, James, and John — up onto a mountain where they have a literal mountaintop experience with Jesus. As we look at this

mountaintop experience, we will see how God used this experience in the lives of his disciples and think about how we ought to approach mountaintop experiences with God in our own lives.

Up the Mountain with Jesus

Before we jump into our text, let me remind us of where we have been for the past few weeks. Two key questions have surfaced in the Gospel of Luke over the past several chapters. First, *who is Jesus?* We've seen the Pharisees ask this. We've seen the disciples ask this. We have seen Herod ask this. And last week, we saw Jesus ask his disciples this. Peter's answer: You are the Christ – the Messiah.

Peter got that right, but he still doesn't fully understand who Jesus is. Peter tends to get thrown under the bus for this... and maybe rightly so. But we must remember: coming to understand who Jesus is is a process. It doesn't happen in a moment. It happens over time. Peter rightly understands that Jesus is the Messiah. Now Jesus needs to define what that means – both for him, and for those who would follow after him as his disciples.

That brings us to our second key question that has surfaced in these chapters: *What does it mean to follow Jesus as a disciple?* This question is equally as relevant for us today as it was for the first disciples 2,000 years ago.

Who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow him? Jesus' answer, in short, is that he is the Messiah who came to die so that we might live, and those who follow him must also give up their lives if they want to experience true life in him.

On the heels of this answer, we get to our text for today: Luke 9:28-36. Let's jump in with the first two verses.

Luke 9:28-29

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.

This scene is often called the *transfiguration*. It is this strange, almost mystical moment where Jesus' appearance is transformed, transfigured—similar, yet different. How exactly did his appearance change? Luke tells us that his clothes became dazzling white. Matthew, in his account, adds the detail that his face *shone like the sun*. He began to glow, radiating light, radiating glory.

This scene brings to mind another mountaintop experience in Scripture. In Exodus, Moses goes up to the mountain to meet with God and receive the law. When he came down, his face shone with the glory of God, reflecting God's glory because of his proximity to God.

Here, Jesus does not merely reflect God's glory, as Moses did. Rather, he reveals the glory that always has been and always will be *his*. Here on the mountain, Jesus helps his disciples see him as he truly is. While his humanity had in part been masking his glory, he takes off the mask, peels back

the veil—still only partially—so that they can see his glory. The very glory of God in the face of Jesus.

But it doesn't stop there. Look at what happens next.

Luke 9:30-31

³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now things really start to get strange, as Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Did they appear in actual physical bodies? Was this a kind of vision? It's not exactly clear, but we know this actually *happened*. It's not a dream or a hallucination.

Moses and Elijah are two monumental figures in the Old Testament. Moses was the one who led the people out of Egypt through the Exodus, the paradigmatic act of redemption in the Old Testament. Elijah was a prophet who looked to the future, to the new creation, the final act of redemption and restoration that was to come.

As they appear in glory, they speak with Jesus about his departure — literally, his *exodus*. This, of course, refers to Jesus' coming crucifixion and the new and greater exodus that he would bring — freedom not just from the slave drivers in Egypt, but freedom from sin, from guilt, from shame, from sickness, and from death.

When I was a senior in high school, my dad took me to New York to watch the US Tennis Open. As a tennis player, I grew up watching the greatest tennis players in the world on TV. These were the days of Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, and — one of the best players of all time — Roger Federer. I idolized these players, and the chance to see them play in person was overwhelming.

This, times a thousand, is what this moment would have been like for Peter, James, and John. But it takes them a moment to get there. Look at **Luke 9:32**:

³² Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

I love this verse because it is almost comical, but also SO relatable. Peter, James, and John are on the mountaintop with Jesus, his eternal glory bursting through his humanity. Two heroes of the faith who haven't walked the earth for centuries appear with him. And the disciples are "heavy with sleep."

The reality is, though, that we all find ourselves in this situation sometimes, don't we? Spiritually asleep. Underwhelmed by Jesus and his glory. We experience spiritual apathy. We show up to church *unexpectant* for what God might do. We try to pray, but we are too *distracted* to carry on a conversation with God. We say we want Jesus more than anything, but then our hearts drift off into *idolatry*, seeking money, power, comfort, prestige more than we seek after him.

The reality is that we all become *heavy with sleep* at times. And like the disciples, we need to wake up! We need to **Wake up and Witness Jesus**.

You see, this is part of the purpose of the mountaintop: *it wakes us up to the glory of Jesus*.

Those moments where we feel overwhelmingly close to God — when he feels tangibly present, when he fills us with joy, when he speaks with clarity, when he pulls back the curtain — these moments are meant to wake us up from our spiritual sleep. To pull us out of our apathy. To pull us out of our idolatry. To recenter our attention on him. To remind us that *he is our joy*.

God gives us these mountaintop experiences so that we might wake up and witness Jesus. To see his glory. And to give him praise.

Whatever I experienced on that rock overlooking the Flameau River pales in comparison to what Peter, James, and John experienced on this mountain. This was the high point in their life with God. And it helped them see Jesus as he truly was.

And what did they see? Overwhelming glory. And a path that was headed to the cross. As this mountaintop experience wakes the disciples to the glory of Jesus, it also helps them see that glory and suffering are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is Jesus' coming exodus — his coming suffering, death, and resurrection — that will lead to his ultimate glory.

Holding on to Glory

This mountaintop experience wasn't meant to last forever, though. Look what happens next, picking up the story in v. 33. **Luke 9:33-35**;

³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

Peter can see that this moment was about to end. Moses and Elijah begin to depart, but Peter wants to hold on to the moment. *Master, this is good*, he says. Being on the mountaintop with Jesus is always good. There is no better place to be. If you have been there, then you know that.

So Peter has a proposal: *let us make three tents*. Peter, here, is alluding to the Jewish Feast of Booths. Once a year, the Hebrew people would build tents, or booths, and they would live in them for a week, just as they did in the wilderness after the Exodus. This feast was meant to remind them of God's deliverance in the past, and anchor them in the promise of God's deliverance of the future.

Peter doesn't want this moment to end. He'd like to stay here for a week — or more! *Let's build tents*, he says. *Jesus, can't we stay on the mountaintop with you for a while longer?*

But we aren't meant to live on the mountaintop with Jesus — at least not until he comes back again. And this moment with Jesus and his disciples isn't meant to last forever.

But it's also not quite over. Now that the disciples are fully awake, there is something else that God wants to accomplish on the mountaintop. So a cloud — a clear symbol of the presence of God — comes down and envelopes the mountaintop. Then a voice from heaven speaks — the voice of the Father speaks: *This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him.*

As he speaks, the Father is affirming the identity of Jesus. Peter has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, and here God confirms that. *Yes, this is my Son, my Chosen One, the one through whom I will bring deliverance.*

But he also gives an instruction. *Listen to him.* Listen to him as he tells you that he is going to suffer and die. Listen to him as he tells you what it will cost you to follow him. And listen to him when he tells you how much he loves you and who you are *in him*.

There are a lot of voices that want to speak into our lives. There are a lot of voices that want to tell us who we are and how to live.

Let Jesus' Voice Be the Loudest. Let Jesus' voice be the loudest. Don't let your manager or your CEO tell you who you are and how to live. Don't let your parents or your spouse tell you who you are and how to live. Don't let your guilty conscience or your overinflated ego tell you who you are and how to live. Don't even let me tell you who you are and how to live. Listen to Jesus. Let his voice be the loudest. Let him tell you who you are. Let him tell you how to live. Let him tell you who he is.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't listen to anyone else. Certainly we should. But we must not let the other voices drown out the voice of Jesus.

Sometimes God gives us mountaintop experiences with him because the mountaintop helps us hear his voice more clearly.

Several months ago, I had a mountaintop experience with God that did just that.

At the time, I was in a pretty low place. I had just had a series of disappointing experiences that had me spiraling into discouragement, confusion, and anger. The voice of the evil one was ringing in my ears, and I was beginning to believe his lies — lies about God, lies about me, lies about others. I began to question many things in life, including my call to ministry.

I went for a run over at Rancho San Antonio — trails I have run many times before. As I did, I poured out my frustrations to God, and God met me in a profound way. It was like a cloud descended on me and the presence of God was thick around me. My mind began to replay the past 20 years of my life, from the moment I first felt called into ministry at age 16 until that day. I retraced the journey — with all of its highs and all of its lows.

And from the cloud, I heard the voice of God — not audibly, but more clearly than I ever have before. And he simply said, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

This was one of those moments where the veil between heaven and earth felt so thin. God felt so present. His voice sounded so clear. And he spoke exactly in the pain, frustration, and confusion that I was experiencing, and he gave me exactly what I needed to keep going.

This is the power of being on the mountain with Jesus: We are able to hear his voice more clearly. The lies of the enemy become faint. And God speaks truth to us – so that we can see him more clearly and see ourselves more clearly as well.

Back to Life As Usual

Peter, James, and John heard God's voice clearly on that mountaintop with Jesus, and it gave them what they needed to continue on. But, as we saw earlier, this mountaintop experience wasn't meant to last forever. Look at what happens next:

Luke 9:36:

³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus returns to his normal human form. Life goes back to usual.

But Peter, James, and John are forever changed. And they treasure this experience they have just had.

From here, they will make the journey down the mountain, back into their everyday life.

We saw earlier that Peter wanted to hold on to this mountaintop experience. *Let's build booths.* Let's make this moment last forever. But the mountaintop experience isn't meant to last forever on this side of heaven. Rather, these temporary experiences of the presence and power of God are meant to propel us back down the mountain into our everyday lives, where we find that God is just as present with us as he was on the mountain.

So here is my last encouragement for us this morning: **Find God in your Everyday Life.** Find God in your everyday life. Mountaintop experiences with God are amazing, but they don't last forever — by design. And yet those mountaintop experiences are meant to teach us that God is just as present with us on the mountain as he is in the valley or the plain.

This is great news because most of life is lived in the valley or the plain. Most of life feels mundane. Ordinary. Perhaps even boring. But that is right where God wants to meet you — in your everyday, ordinary life. If you look for God there, I promise that you will find him.

Conclusion

As I retrace my journey with God, I have had a handful of mountaintop experiences with God. These have been some of the most significant moments in my life with God. But they are the exception, not the norm.

When I got home from the canoe trip in high school where I met with God on that rock on the shore of the Flambeau River, I was on fire for God — full of joy, passion, and fervor. The next week, I was up at our family cabin. I got up early one morning and wanted to recreate the moment that I had with God on that retreat. The conditions seemed perfect. The lake was like glass. The sun was rising. The sky was clear. I grabbed my Bible, got in a small paddle boat, and paddled my way out into the middle of the lake. I was ready to climb back to the mountaintop.

But I never made it to the mountaintop that day. I didn't hear his voice. I wasn't moved to tears. My heart didn't stir within me. Instead, it felt...ordinary. But still, I knew that God was there.

When it comes to mountaintop experiences with God, there are two temptations that we need to be aware of. One is to view them with skepticism. We think that they can't happen, or perhaps even worse that they are merely emotional manipulation. No, they are real. We see them in Scripture, and saints throughout the millennia have been shaped by them. God uses mountaintop experiences to wake us to his glory and to speak to us more clearly. We should not be skeptical about the mountaintop.

But nor should we chase after the mountaintop. We must be careful not to seek a mountain-top-to-mountaintop spirituality in which we *need* God to show up in this way.

Instead, we should meet God on his own terms — whether he wants to meet us on the mountain, in the valley, or on the ordinary plain where most of life is lived.

We can't control God. But we can enjoy God. We can find God. We can commune with God in the life that he has given us.

Let's pray.