

GO! Up the Mountain  
February 26, 2012

We are just at the half way point of the series we've been working through in the gospel of Matthew. Today is lesson seven of fourteen. I wasn't here last week and I was listening to the sermon on line and I heard something that caught my ear. Bob said something to the effect that "I get to speak a little bit longer because I don't do it every week. Mike does it every week so he has to keep it shorter. So I assume by that logic, since I didn't speak last week, I get to go twice as long this week. So I encourage you to get comfortable and we'll dive into our text for this morning.

I want to start by telling you about one of the best presents I've ever received. One of the best presents I've ever received I got for my birthday last year. Do you want to see a picture of it? Here it is. Just to help you zoom in on what I'm talking about it's that part right there. It was nothing! Well, technically it was next to nothing. It was next to nothing that occurred basically in the middle of nowhere. And that was one of the best presents I have ever received. My wife, for my birthday last summer, said "You've got three days and two nights and I've booked you into a little cabin that is out in the middle of nowhere and you go there and be by yourself and come back in three days. And that's what I did and it was wonderful!

I went to this little place that she had booked me into. These people had a farm and kind of on the home quarter a good portion of it was forested and they had cut, it wasn't really a road, it was kind of a trail through the trees. I followed the guy out there to where I was supposed to go and we drove down this little trail. You saw a sign that said cabin one this way and another trail headed off that way. We kept going and saw another sign, cabin two this way and another trail headed off through the trees. We got to the very end of the trail and it was cabin three and he said "Here you are." It was totally isolated. Trees all around. I didn't see or hear anyone. The only one I saw all the time I was there was the gentleman who was running the cabins. He would come by everyday to pick up garbage or just check on me and see how I was doing. And that was okay, except he was a little bit chatty. And I didn't mind that so much, most of the time that would have been okay, I'd sit down and chat with him and enjoy that, but all I could think of when he was coming and chatting with me is "You're a something in the middle of my nothing! And I'm here to enjoy my nothing."

Sometimes I think we all kind of feel like that. You know, wouldn't you just like to get away. Most of our snowbirds have returned, just in time for the snow. And they're back, but they'd likely tell you, "You know what, it's kind of nice to get away for a while." And everyone of us, every now and then we feel that urge, that need to just get a way. To get away to a solitary place by ourselves. And even Jesus felt that need from time to time. He often went away by himself to a solitary place. And our text this morning is one of those occasions.

Now, my trip was blissfully uneventful – aside from the fact that I had to fix the same hole in the same tire two separate times, which was kind of annoying. But other than

that my trip was blissfully uneventful. However, what happened on Jesus' journey was literally out of this world. So, let's read what happens out of Matthew 17:

**Matthew 17:1 - 8** <sup>1</sup>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 enveloped 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.

This morning we're going to quickly look at this story from three different angles based on three of the statement made. But first, before we get into that, let's just unpack the story a little bit and kind of get a sense of exactly what is going on.

When we talk about the mountain the went up on scholar kind of debate this a little bit. Some people have suggested that is was Mount Tabor which is kind of down there south of the Sea of Galilee. That's about six miles from Nazareth and about twelve miles from the Sea of Galilee. And some people have suggested that that was the mountain Jesus went up on. The only problem with that theory is that archaeologist have discovered that at the top of that mountain was a Roman garrison. And so that's probably not where Jesus went.

The more likely location is Mount Hermon which is up north here. And it's probably ten, twelve, fifteen miles north of Caesarea Philippi which is where Jesus has been around lately. Mount Hermon looks like this and they tell me that it is about 9200 feet above sea level, but it's actually more like 11,000 feet above the bottom of the floor of the Jordan Valley. The highest peak is usually covered with snow, but there are two lower peaks and so given the height of the mountain, people kind of think maybe it was one of these lower peaks that Jesus and his disciples went up on.

Now, at any time, if you are an Israelite whenever you read in your Bible about someone going up on a mountain the first image that is going to pop into your mind is always going to be Mount Sinai. Back when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and Moses went up on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. And so immediately this story, for Matthew's readers most of whom were Jews, would immediately bring that kind of image to the back of their minds as they were reading it. Now, aside from Jesus and the three disciples he took with him there were three other presences up on the mountain that day. Let's take a look at who they were.

The first two were Moses and Elijah. These two have a lot of similarities to them, a lot of similar traits , so we'll just run through some of those quickly. First, they had both

witnessed God's power and God's hand at work in a very first hand personal kind of way. Moses saw the burning bush – the bush that was on fire, but never burned up. Moses was the guy who with God's help parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk through. And so he has seen God's hand at work in those things, not to mention other little things like the Ten Plagues, the manna that came every morning, the quail, water spring from rocks, miraculous healing from snake bites. So Moses had clearly seen God do some pretty powerful things. Elijah, he's the guy who went up on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal. And he said to the prophets of Baal, "You build an altar and call out to your god and we'll see what happens." So they did that for a long time and nothing happened. Then Elijah built his altar, doused it with water three times, built a trench around it to soak up the water. And then he called out to God and God sent down fire. And, I read this again this week, He sent down fire and it burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the water in the trench, the stones of the altar and the dirt! That's a pretty startling display of God's power and Elijah was there for that moment.

Both Moses and Elijah had visions of God's glory up on a mountain. We've already talked about Mount Sinai, when Moses was up there receiving the Ten Commandments he asked God if he could see Him. And God said, well that's a little too much for you, but here's what I'll do: I'll hide you in the crevasse of the rock and cover you with my hand. And I'll pass by and just when I'm almost gone, I'll remove my hand and you will catch a glimpse of my back. And so that's what they did and Moses was so overwhelmed by that experience that when he came down his face was glowing. He had to put a veil on because he was freaking everyone out because of the impact of that experience. Elijah had a different kind of experience. He was up on Mount Horab and God said he was going to come by and several different things came along: a windstorm, an earthquake, a fire and then finally God came along in a gentle whisper. And it says Elijah put his cloak over his head and came out of the cave to speak with God. And so the both had these very close encounters with God up on a mountain.

They both had really unique and strange endings to their lives. Moses, it says at the end of Deuteronomy, he went up on a mountain and God showed him all the land that He had promised to Israel. And Moses died there and God took his body and buried it somewhere and no one knows exactly where. That's a strange ending for a life, I don't recall that happening any other time. Rabbinic tradition says that God actually took Moses to heaven, but either way that's a very unique way to end life on this earth. Elijah is even more dramatic. You might remember the story of Elijah, when it was time for him to depart, a fiery chariot came out of heaven and picked him up and took him back into heaven. Now that's a fairly dramatic way to exit this world. So, they both had these powerful experiences at the end of their lives.

Moses was seen as the one God used to give the Law to the Israelite people. Elijah was seen as the greatest of all of the prophets of the Old Testament – the ones who brought God's message to the people. Moses is considered to be one of the model leaders who brought the Law, Elijah is the anticipated forerunner of the Messiah. So as we go up on the mountain top and we watch this story unfold, these are the two characters who show up.

But there is a third presence on the mountain that day. It is said that on Mount Hermon there is a strange phenomenon where very quickly a cloud formation will just form around the mountain top. And the cloud will get very thick and very dense. And then just as quickly as it appeared it will evaporate and disappear. And that's what happens on this day. And when the disciples were up there they may have known about this kind of effect that often happened and may have just thought that this is what happens when you're up on Mount Hermon. But given what else was going on at the time I think they probably had some sense that this was no ordinary cloud. And if you were a Jew and you knew your history very well you would know that a bright cloud had a very specific meaning. A bright cloud often represented the presence of God. When Moses was up on Sinai the top of the mountain was covered with a bright cloud. When the Israelites set up the tabernacle which was their place of worship in the desert and God's presence came to dwell in the tabernacle a bright cloud descended upon it. When Solomon finished his temple and they dedicated it to the Lord, the glory of the Lord came in and a bright cloud surrounded it. So when Peter and James and John were up on the mountain and they saw a bright cloud come in and surround Jesus and Moses and Elijah they had a pretty good sense of who was in that cloud. Jewish literature often used a bright cloud to refer to the time when the Messiah would come and gather his people together. And so that's kind of what's happening up here on the mountain. The bright cloud has come in and God is amid their presence up on the mountain.

And as they are witnessing all this happening: Elijah and Moses appearing and God appearing in the cloud, Peter suggests building three shelters. He says, "Lord why don't we build three shelters? One for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Now, building shelters sounds like an odd response to us. It's likely not the first thing I would have thought to say – if I could have thought of anything to say in that moment! But for them it wasn't that out of place because the word used for shelter is the same word that's used for tabernacle or tent. So it was the same kind of thing as back in the wilderness when the Israelites build the tabernacle as a place to worship God. Or you may have read in the New Testament about something called the Feast of Tabernacles where they would set up these little shelters all along the road. So this isn't an entirely unreasonable response for Peter. But what I find interesting about this story is that it says that, "even while Peter was suggesting this," it says "while he was still speaking, a voice came out of the cloud." And the voice of God says, "This is my Son, Listen to him." As if to say, "You know what, you don't need to build three shelters. Here is the one you need to listen to."

And as we go through Matthew's gospel, God continues to nudge us along and remind us that Jesus is not just another lawgiver like Moses. And Jesus is not just another prophet like Elijah. Jesus is the one to whom the greatest characters of the Old Testament defer. Listen to Him.

And so, when you read the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus says "You have heard it say this, but now I tell you this." Listen to Him. When I a couple chapters from now Jesus says:

**Matthew 22:37 - 40** <sup>37</sup>Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup>And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup>All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Listen to Him.

And the interesting thing to me is that it doesn't matter who you put in that line up the answer is always the same. If you stand Jesus with Moses and Elijah, God says listen to Jesus. And the only voice, to the Jewish mind, that had more authority than Moses and Elijah was God Himself and now God Himself was saying, “Listen to Jesus.” Jesus had already and would continue to have a lot of major disagreements with the Pharisees, the teachers of the law and even the chief priests. And God says, even if the voices of religion and tradition and culture contradict Jesus, listen to Jesus.

If Mike, or Bob, or anyone else stands up here and says something other than what Jesus has said, Listen to Jesus. If the latest book by Lynn Anderson or Max Lucado or Hybels or Dobson or Swindoll or Warren or whoever doesn't match up with what Jesus says in the gospels, listen to Jesus. The Apostle Paul himself states, **Galatians 1:8 - 9** <sup>8</sup>But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! <sup>9</sup>As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

If anyone tells you anything other than what Jesus has said, listen to Jesus. And there are countless voices in our world that are telling us what to be and what to do and how to act and what's important. There are celebrities and gurus and Oprah and the media and the internet and all sorts of things and if any of those things tells you something different than what Jesus has said, then listen to Jesus. Because all of those people are simply people and they are flawed. Even Moses and Elijah weren't perfect. When Moses was up on the mountain and God was showing him the promised land, the rest of the story is God says I'm going to show it to you, but you won't get to enter it because of some of the things you've done and the mistakes you've made in your life you're not going to get to enter the promised land. Elijah when he's on Mount Horeb and God comes to him, the reason he's up there is because he's hiding out in a cave. And he's feeling like you know what, I'm about ready to give up. I'm about ready to throw in the towel on this whole thing, because God has abandoned me and this is useless and hopeless. All people are flawed even people as great as Moses and Elijah. So no matter who it is that says it, we must always come back to Jesus.

Now, perhaps what's even more difficult is if your own logic and intelligence and IQ says something other than what Jesus has said. If you feel like, as I sometimes do, you know what? I can figure this out on my own; I can find the answer on my own; I can solve this by myself. Well, if the answer I come up with is something that contradicts what Jesus has plainly stated, then God says, “Trust me on this one, listen to him.”

Clearly the message “Listen to Him” is one that has prompted Matthew to include this story in his gospel to the Jews, because they needed to hear that Jesus was superior to Moses and Elijah and everyone that had come before. But I often wonder, why did Jesus go up on the mountain in the first place?

Now, Jesus often went to a solitary place. We have it recorded that he often would go off to a solitary place, especially before major events would happen in his ministry. Several weeks ago we talked about this: after his baptism and before his ministry starts Jesus went out into the wilderness by himself for forty days. Last week you read about John the Baptist and when he was beheaded and the news reached Jesus, he went off to a solitary place. After the feeding of the five thousand and before walking on water Jesus went up a mountain to a solitary place by himself. When the crowds started to overwhelm them, Jesus would often go off to a solitary place. Luke says,

**Luke 5:15 - 16** <sup>15</sup>Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Even after the last supper, Jesus went out to the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples and he went on to an even more secluded place than where they were at. So before his arrest and his trial and his crucifixion we find Jesus off by himself. And on this occasion, as Jesus has gone up on the mountain, he has gone to speak with God. This is at a time before the turning of the tides as it were. It is as his march to Jerusalem is drawing near. It is as the resistance from the Jewish leaders is intensifying. And he had come for a glimpse of home. For a few words of assurance. For a reminder of his pre-incarnate self. For a preview of his future glory. For literally a little slice of heaven.

I don't know if you watch any of those shows like Survivor or whatever, but in Survivor one of the things they do is they have these challenges and if you win the challenge you get a little reward. And probably the most hard fought after reward they have on the show comes somewhere about two thirds of the way through. And they say, “Do you want to know what you're playing for today?” And everyone says “Yeah, what are we playing for today?” And they say “I have here on an iPhone or iPad or whatever a recorded message for each of you from one of your loved ones back home. And whoever wins this challenges gets to see their message from home. Everyone else doesn't.” And it is the most hard fought challenge in the entire show. I think it is even more hard fought than the final challenge to win a million bucks. Because after being isolated for that period of time everyone is just longing for a little word from home. Just to see their loved one's face and to hear a word of encouragement.

This was Jesus' message from home. And from the cloud a voice speaks and it is much like the voice at his baptism, but I imagine that felt like quite a long time ago. And the voice says, “This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.” And in this moment Matthew chooses to use a word as he talks about Jesus being transformed into all this glory. He uses a word in the passive voice which tells us that this isn't

something that Jesus himself initiated. He didn't just go up there and kind of rip off his human costume and go back into his heavenly form, this is something that God reached down and did for Jesus to transform him for a moment back into his more heavenly image. Luke tells us, not only that, but:

**Luke 9:30 - 31** <sup>30</sup>Two men, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup>appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.

And the interesting thing here is that the word for departure in Greek is *εξοδος*. Can anyone guess what that word means? The same word used for exodus. Some translations actually use the word exodus in Luke 9. And not only does that tie into the imagery of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, but it is just a great image and reminder of what Jesus had come to do. Jesus is not leaving, he's leading and exodus! He's delivering people from the bondage of sin. He's guiding people into the freedom of new. He's leading people into a promised land where everything will be the way it should be. Jesus was not invincible. He was not travelling an easy road. And he needed this moment, this message from home, to remind him here is what you're accomplishing Jesus. This is what you came for and it is more than worth the price. Continue along the road. Jesus went up on the mountain because he needed to hear that.

Which brings us to the disciples. Jesus often went off on his own, but rarely did he take someone with him. This time he brings Peter, James and John along. When Jesus went off alone, but why did he bring these guys? Well, if Jesus needed to hear that message from God for what was about to come, the disciples needed to hear it too. They needed to witness this event for what was about to come. Because the tide was about to turn for them too and things were going to get very ugly. They needed to get some affirmation. They had been there when John's disciples had come and said "Jesus are you really the one?" And I imagine there were some points in Jesus' ministry and some points that were to come when the disciples were asking that question themselves. "Are you really the one? You're not turning out exactly how I expected you to be. Have I hitched my horse to the wrong wagon as it were? Have I laid my life on the line for something that's not going to turn out the way I expected?"

This happens just after Peter makes his great confession where Jesus comes and says "Who do people say I am?" And they say, "Some say John the Baptist and other's Elijah," (you can rule that one out now) "others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." And Peter says "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And immediately after that Jesus starts talking about how the Son of man must go to Jerusalem and he must suffer and he must die. And there was something about that moment that the disciples needed to be assured and affirmed.

And when the voice speaks from the cloud the disciples fall on the ground terrified. And I wonder, what took you guys so long? I would have been on the ground terrified a long time ago! But they fall on the ground terrified when the voice speaks. But even before



that happens, when Moses and Elijah appear Peter speaks and he says, "It is good for us to be here." And people have speculated on exactly what that means. Some say he's just acknowledging what a privilege it is for them to be there and witness that event. Some people say, maybe he's saying it's good for us to be here so we can go and testify to others what we've seen. This is the proof that everyone's looking for that you actually are the Messiah, so it's good that we're here so we can go tell everyone. Except that on the way down the mountain Jesus says, "Now don't tell anyone what you saw until after I have been raised from the dead." Some people have even said that the way the text is written this could be read as a question. In other words "Is it good for us to be here?" Like maybe we shouldn't be here witnessing what we're seeing. And I can kind of empathize with that because that's likely kind of how I would feel at that moment too. But I kind of think that what Peter might be saying when he says, "Jesus it's good for us to be here," is simply "You know what? We needed this. Jesus we needed to be here and we need to soak this up and we needed the affirmation we needed the assurance that you are the Messiah we believe you to be, we needed the confirmation for what lies ahead."

And you know we will all go through times like that in our lives. Times when we need to hear God's words. Times when we need to hear God say, "You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you." John writes in 1 John 3:

**1 John 3:1a** How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.

And we need to hear that from time to time. There are times when faith waivers and doubts creep in. Times when strength wains and courage fades. Times when we need to be reminded of the words:

**Isaiah 40:28 - 31** Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

There are times in all of our lives when we need to be restored and renewed and refreshed. Times when we need to be recharged.

We left one of our cars at my parent's house last weekend we went over there on Monday or Tuesday to pick it up. And Michelle was taking off in one car and I got in the second car and I went to put the key in and it may this sound. (silence) And that's not a good sound! And so, of course, I tried it again, and the same thing happened, so I got out and flagged down Michelle and had her come back. And we got out the booster cables. Have any of you done this so far this winter? Got out the booster cables and put them on the good battery of the one car and then on the dead battery of the other car. We let it run for a little while and then I try to start it up and it reluctantly did the



(sound of car starting). I let it run for a while and I drove it home and when I got home I turned it off. And I thought, I'm just going to check and see and so I tried to turn it back on and it went (sound of car not starting). And that was it. So I got the other car out again and got it attached. Let it sit for a little while longer. Started it up and let it run for a good while longer. And eventually that battery was recharged and ready to go. And that's the way our batteries work: sometimes they get run down and they need to be recharged.

I remember, what seems like a long time ago, I was in Dauphin working as an intern and Karl's dad was there and he was the minister. And he took myself, and Jonathon's older brother and another who was attending Western at the time and he took us out, I don't know where. I can't remember where we went, I can't even remember the place we stayed at, but it was in some little remnant of a town, as I recall it. I only remember two things from that day or two we spent out there. The first thing I remember is that I spent almost all my time in this vacant lot sitting on this crumbling foundation of a building. And Blair had taken us there and said, "There's no agenda for these days all I want you to do is spend time with God. Take your Bible, maybe take a book, take a journal and just spend hours with God." And that little crumbly foundation of a place, that was my mountain for those few days. That's where I spent time alone with God. On this little retreat, Blair told me, "Wherever you go in ministry, you need to find a place to retreat with God."

And often I think we view retreat as a bad word. We kind of have the military views of it in our mind so when we hear retreat we think of run away or give up. But as I thought about the word this week two kind of positive definitions came to mind. One was the idea of to re-treat would be if I gave you all a treat like a timbit or lollipop or whatever it is that you would find to be a treat. And if we passed them all around the room this morning and if when we were done I said, "How would you like me to re-treat you and give you another one?" You'd probably all think that was a pretty positive thing, wouldn't you? The second idea that came to my mind was, this week I was kind of being stupid and I sliced off a bit of my finger – I feel kind of wussy even talking about this because I know a lot of you have had much more significant procedures than this in the last couple weeks, but I sliced off a bit of my finger and I couldn't get it to stop bleeding so I went to the clinic so they could (pause) treat it. And the doctor treated it and got it to stop bleeding and start healing and I thought to myself, you know what? If I go home and I slice off another chunk what am I going to do? I'm going to go back to retreat.

And we all have these times when we need to retreat with God. Times when we need to say God, I just need to go into your presence and get a little bit of blessing just by being close to you. God I have some wounds that I need to come into your presence and have them treated or maybe treated again because I've been rewounded by something and I just need to spend time retreating with you. Now, there are lots of people gone away this weekend to a Ladies Retreat and that's a wonderful thing to be at, but it's not exactly the same as what we're talking about. And when we come here on Sunday mornings that is a little bit of a retreat with God. But there is something

different about us retreating one on one with God. About us going to a solitary place alone with God and retreating. If we continue to say, and rightly so I believe, that Christianity is about a personal relationship with God then the only way that that works is if I'm spending personal time with God. One on one time with God. Heart to heart time with God.

Now the catch with that, in my experience, is that recharging our spiritual batteries often requires going up on the mountain. And that's something that most of us don't have time or don't make time to do. Many of us are like Peter, who when he saw what was happening with Moses and Elijah and Jesus being transformed the first thing Peter says is "We need to do something! We need to build something. You go get the tools. You go get the lumber. Let's do something." And a lot of us are like that. We've always got to be doing something, doing something. And there are times for that, but there are also times for stillness. Times for wonder, for adoration and reverence in the presence of the supreme glory. We are reminded by book titles and catch phrases all over the place that warn things like "Too busy not to pray" or "Don't just do something, sit there." And things like that call out to us, but we still struggle to find opportunities to simply just go up the mountain and be with God. The Bible shows us time and time again that God seems to be able to connect best with us when we simple get away from it all. When we follow the advise of the Psalmist who says on God's behalf:

**Psalms 46:10a** "Be still, and know that I am God!"

When God appeared to Elijah in 1 Kings 19, the story we talked about earlier, he wasn't in the windstorm, he wasn't in the earthquake, he wasn't in the fire. God came in a gentle whisper. But most of us have so much noise and activity in our lives that God's whispers go largely unheard and therefore our batteries never get fully charged.

So, today's message is not complicated or profound. It's very simply this: Find your mountain. Find your place to be alone with God. Find your place to be refresh and renewed by His Spirit. Find your place to have your spiritual batteries recharged. And I don't what that will be or what it will look like for you. All I know is that it needs to be a place that is free from disruptions and distractions. A place where you can be alone with God. And then set aside a time to pray and listen and wait and worship. Clear some space in your calendar for God. Create opportunities for his voice to be heard. And then, as often as you can, go up the mountain.