

Matthew 17:1-9

When Sir Edmund Hillary, in 1953, climbed the highest peak in the world, Mt. Everest, the whole world was amazed. People stopped and took notice of what he did. It was a feat no one else had ever accomplished before. And yet, his ascent did not really change anyone's life. He climbed Everest, but no one became wealthy as a result. He climbed, but poverty, disease, and death continued as before. The climb changed him, but the lives of everyone else pretty much remained the same.

Which brings us to today's Gospel reading in Matthew 17 where we see Jesus climbing the Mt. Transfiguration with His disciples, and the question which may be on our minds is: What does His ascent mean for me? So Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain some 2,000 years ago; what does that have to do with me?

Later today millions of people in America and around the world will watch a handful of men play a game using a pointed ball made of pigskin. Much of the world will have their eyes glued to the television set even though the outcome of the game will not change their life. Unless you bet a large amount of money on the game, (and I pray you didn't), the final score will not change your financial situation in life. The outcome will not cure you of the flu or heal your arthritis. You may feel like a winner or a loser for a while, depending on which team prevails, but the game has no bearing whatsoever on how you stand with God. It will not affect your place in eternity.

Dare I say, however, that more people will watch the Superbowl than will hear the words of Jesus in this text for today? More people will eagerly stuff their mouths with finger food at Superbowl parties later today than will open their mouths to the body and blood of the Lord at His altar this morning? We don't need a life-changing reason to watch a football game, yet when our God and Savior comes to us with His words of life, we demand to know just what good things will come from our giving Him an hour or two of our time.

Peter, James, and John didn't feel that way; and perhaps this is because they had something which is so lacking in our modern day—they had the fear of God. When Jesus was transfigured so that He shone like the sun, Peter didn't know what to say. And when the Father spoke from the cloud they fell down on their faces with fear. They realized that God was someone they were not. They were mere creatures and He is the Creator. They were sinners in His holy presence. They weren't laughing up there on the mountain; they were very afraid. And somehow in our modern age we have lost that fear.

We act as if God was more like a grandpa in a rocking chair than the Righteous Judge of sinners that He is. We have come to believe what the world thinks—that God will not condemn you to hell as long as you're basically a nice person. But remember this—apart from Christ, you and I are nothing before God. We are like insects for Him to squash beneath His feet. Apart from Jesus, God is no loving God; He has no mercy, shows no compassion, and forgives no one; apart from Jesus.

That's why Peter, James, and John were so terrified. When the cloud came over them, they could not see Jesus. All they could hear was the booming voice of God and they melted into their shoes. Our world, along with our own sinful flesh, does not grasp this. We think God is too nice to send anyone to hell, unless they really deserve it...and very few do. So

even when I skip church, cheat on my taxes, and say a few cuss words God, being as nice as He is, will just look the other way. But if this is our attitude toward God, then there is not much hope for us. If you and I do not cringe beneath God's Law, how will we ever appreciate His Gospel? If we refuse to fall to our knees with fear before God because of our wretched sinfulness, how will God ever lift us up with His words of comfort?

Peter, James, and John were rightly terrified. Their faces were buried in the ground. They had heard the holy God speak to them, and because they were in this posture, Jesus could come to them and lift them to their feet. "Rise," he said, "And have no fear." Apart from Jesus there is only fear. But in Christ there is only peace and comfort. They looked up and saw no one except Jesus. And that same Jesus is here for you today. If your face is buried in the ground in repentance, then blessed are you, for Christ is here with His Word of Forgiveness for you. If you are terrified over your sins, then blessed are you, because here with His body and blood Jesus calms your fears.

"Rise," He says to you, "And have no fear." He gave His life for you. He climbed up the cross on another mountain so that your sins cannot condemn you. Jesus felt your fears. He realized your terrors. He took away your punishment. In Christ Jesus...here and now in Jesus' words to you there is for you only grace and compassion, only life and salvation.

And it's not because God is nice. It's because Jesus, out of love for you, became your Savior from sin, death, and hell. On the cross He became enveloped by the cloud of His Righteous Father, and it was a fearsome cloud—the cloud of His anger, the cloud of judgment. Jesus died in that dark cloud for you so that you will never know God's wrath; so that you may live always in the cloud of your baptism—walking before God always as His dear forgiven child in Christ Jesus.

What does the Mt. Transfiguration mean for you? It means that Jesus is your mighty God who shines like the sun, and yet He was willing to die in darkness for you. It means that no matter what your fears in life may be, Jesus lifts you out of your fears. He forgives your sins. He gives you eternal life. He gives you peace with God. You can live each day with Christ confident that heaven is yours because He died and rose again for you.

No Superbowl can touch that. No football victory can mean more to you than that. Enjoy the game later if you want to, but above all, enjoy life—your life in Christ and with Christ, because in Him real victory is already yours; eternal life in heaven is already yours. Amen.