

Have you ever had a mountain top experience? Maybe it was out in Colorado, or down in Tennessee. Perhaps it was a clear day, and it cleared your mind. You could see for miles in every direction, and it gave you new insights on your life. You somehow felt closer to God up there, and you may have promised yourself to get your priorities in line putting Him first in your life.

And then what happened? You came back down from your mountain top. You came back to your home. And you came back to real life, and nothing really changed.

We're going to revisit your mountain top later in this sermon. But now we will join three men on their mountain top. Peter, James, and John. We find them going up a high mountain with Jesus. Perhaps it is a clear day. Probably they can see for miles in all directions. But their gaze is quickly directed toward Jesus. He changes His appearance before their eyes. That's what the word *transfigure* means. His face shines like the sun, and His clothing becomes white as light. And as Jesus is transfigured before them, suddenly Moses and Elijah appear. They stand next to Jesus and talk with Him.

Peter, James, and John move from wonderment to trembling fear when a bright cloud overshadows them and they hear the voice of God the Father speaking out of the cloud. Their fear keeps their faces to the ground until Jesus touches them and speaks them out of their fear.

For Peter, James, and John this mountain top experience is unequalled. Never before, and never again, this side of heaven, will anyone experience anything even remotely similar to this. This would have been the experience to top all experiences. And we would fully expect these three disciples to have reset their priorities afterwards.

So, do they? Well, you tell me. Coming down from the mountain, we're told that Jesus rebukes His disciples for their lack of faith. We keep reading in Matthew's Gospel and we find Peter asking Jesus how many times he has to forgive his brother. We see all the disciples rebuking parents for bringing their little children to Jesus. We see James and John hiding behind their mother in asking Jesus for the seats of glory in His kingdom, and then we see the rest of the disciples becoming furious with James and John for making such a request. We see all the disciples running away from Jesus in Gethsemane. And we see Peter denying his Lord three times. Did they reset their priorities? It appears this way, except that they put themselves first in line. So much for their mountain top experience.

I'm not putting down mountain tops. I, myself, enjoy them. And certainly, God places mountains before us to enjoy, even to experience. But mountains can be very deceiving. When these three men are up on their high mountain with Jesus, at first it seems like heaven to them. Peter so much as says this very thing. He wants to build tents up there so they can stay and not come back down that mountain. But their heavenly experience is shattered when they hear the voice of God the Father speaking to them from the cloud. The last thing they want now is to remain on that mountain. They fall on their faces in sheer terror.

This is the same terror that gripped God's people at Mt. Sinai. Our first reading today, from Exodus 24, tells us that the Lord appeared on this mountain top like a devouring fire. What an

experience this was for God's people. Surely, with the fear of God in their hearts, they would reset their priorities and not allow themselves to fall into utter sinfulness. And yet, just eight chapters later, we see them making a golden calf to worship. What good are mountains if they continually fail us?

Let's revisit your mountain if you have had such an experience. Did it make you a better person? Did it bring you closer to God? Mountains are deceiving because feelings are deceiving. Whatever we feel in our hearts, whether up on a mountain top or not, is not necessarily the truth. If we feel closer to God up there, then why do we, afterwards, abandon Him? Because we do. And why does it appear that He even, sometimes, abandons us?

Like the disciples up on their mountain with Jesus who, afterwards, fell again and again into sin, we see the exact same failings in our lives. This is how we abandon God. We abandon His commandments. We think we're such good Christians despite the truth that we make a mess of His Ten Commandments. And He doesn't stop us from doing that. Just as He allowed Peter to make a fool of himself, all that talk about making tents up on the mountain, so God allows us to walk foolishly into temptation.

Friends, there is only one mountain top experience that truly matters, and you weren't there. But Jesus was. On this mountain He hung on a cross for you. And what He experienced, what He endured, is no deception. He went through the actual terrors and sufferings of hell in your place. And God really and truly did abandon Him. He allowed His Son to be crucified. Because on that mountain top the Son of God shed His blood for the sins of the whole world.

And this is how God would draw near to us. You don't feel close to God. You are close to Him. Not because of your mountain top, but because of Jesus' mountain top where He died for you. Jesus took your sins, the very sins that keep God away from you, and He paid the penalty of all those sins. Yours and mine, and the sins of the whole world.

It doesn't take your ascending a mountain, therefore, to draw closer to God. In your baptism He draws near to you through Jesus where He forgives your sins, all of them.

God does not ever reset His priorities. You are always first in line. Jesus placed you well ahead of Himself. His cross is proof of this.

And so, He will never abandon you, even when you fail Him, even when you walk, yes, run into temptation.

Does He lead you into temptation? No. But He does lead you up to His Table of Grace. And if you have fear on account of your sins, like He did for Peter, James, and John, He touches you with His very body and blood, and He lifts you out of your fear, yes, out of your sins, by speaking to you the word of forgiveness.

*"Rise and have no fear."* These words of Jesus to Peter, James, and John are for you today. Leave your sins behind, and the fear that they bring. Let Jesus have them. Today you rise with Jesus. Amen.