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Listen to Jesus!
Mark 9:2-9

Have you ever had one of those amazing ***mountaintop experiences***, where you see the grandeur of God's creation? Where you realize how small we are in it? Have you ever felt ***overwhelmed by the glory*** of God, and ***words cannot describe*** it?

Maybe you were literally standing on a ***mountain***, Or beside the ***ocean*** or a lake, or maybe you were looking at an amazing piece of ***art***, or listening to a great piece of ***music***... or witnessing the first moments of a baby after birth... mountaintop experiences can happen ***anywhere, at any time***.

Have you ever had an experience where God was just, so close? So real? So big?

I remember standing in the ***Rocky Mountain National Park***, On top of a mountain, just looking at the view. To say it was ***brehtaking*** is an understatement. I will never forget the beauty of those white topped mountains, the crisp air, the feeling that our world is so big, God is so great, and we are so small. It was near that mountain in Estes Park, CO that I first received my ***call*** to ministry. I think that's no coincidence. To this day, I can bring myself back to that mountain.

But I had another mountaintop experience in front of a ***piece of art***. It was the first time I went back in the religious art section of the Philbrook in Tulsa, and saw the 1635 painting "***Deposition of Christ***" by Luca Giordano. It portrays the body of Jesus being laid in a tomb, but the way it's painted you feel as if ***you are the one receiving*** Christ's body. It's almost life sized, and it felt beyond words.

When I walked into ***Westminster Abbey*** in London I had a moment, walking around looking up at the intricate woodwork and the stained glass, when I was truly overcome with God's glory.

It was beyond beautiful. Talk about inspiring!

What about *you*?

What *kind of experiences* have been your mountaintop experiences?

Has it given you any *inspiration and strength*
to get through the everyday valleys of life?

Think about the *moments of wonder and awe in your life.*

When you knew that God is amazing, this world is breathtaking.

That can become pretty important

when life is overwhelming you with pain and frustration, right?

So I want you to think right now, if you haven't been already,
about *one of your own* mountaintop experiences.

Can you picture it in your mind?

Where were you—what were you doing—what did you see or feel?

I want us to realize that *we've all had these experiences.*

Maybe you just haven't thought of it that way before.

But in different times and places, but we've all had moments when we were
somewhere—where *God felt very real.*

Now, I want you to turn to a person next to you,

and just *use a few words* to describe your experience,
and let them tell you theirs.

Just say *where you were, or what you were doing,*

Like *Rocky Mountain National Park, or swimming in the ocean.*

And I'll give you a minute to do this.....

Does anyone want to share?

Then like we do with the call to worship,

I'll say, God is good,

and you say, *All the Time.*

.....

Now you have a *frame of reference*

to see what Peter, James, and John experienced with Jesus.

For Peter, James and John this was truly a mountaintop experience.

Jesus literally took them to the top of a mountain,
and they literally saw the glory of God in him—
in his appearance, his transfiguration.
While they were looking at Him, they were *looking right at God*.
And they had *no words* to describe it.

But *Peter tries* to have words.
He's always the one who's speaking, even before thinking.
He starts with "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here*".
Hmm..talk about an understatement, don't you think?

Then *like all of us*, Peter *wants the moment to last*.
He suggests that they build booths for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—something to
make this moment tangible, lasting.

And that's when God appears in the cloud,
as a voice telling the three men what's happening,
what they are supposed to get from this experience.
God says, *This is my Son, the Beloved, Listen to him!*

And suddenly it's just Jesus, no more transfiguration.
And then they have to go...*back down the mountain*...
and into the valley of everyday life.

Jesus tells them to keep it all a *secret*
until after the Son of Man is risen from the dead.

It's probably a *good thing there were three* of them at the Transfiguration—
because I don't think they fully understand what was going on,
or what Jesus meant when he told them about his death
before they went up the mountain,
and when he told them about his rising from the dead
as they came down the mountain.

We may not be sworn to secrecy after our experiences,
but we often find that there are *simply no words*, right?
The disciples probably had no words to describe this, at least not at first.
Their experience is *similar to ours* when you think about it.

And think about the *context*.

Before this Jesus had been telling them about his impending *death*.
Talk about walking through the *valleys of life*,
he was taking them through some *dark valleys*.

And *then* they went up on the mountain.
Where it was all so *amazing, so beautiful, so brilliant and awesome*.

But then they came back down, *back down to continue ministry* with Jesus.
They left Moses and Elijah way *up there*,
and came *back down here* to help the sick and the poor, the sinners and outcasts.

When you think about your mountaintop experiences
do you find that they happened just after, or maybe just before
some challenging time in your life?
Did you go from *down* here to *up* there, and *back down* again?

We can only imagine the *inspiration* that transfiguration gave them
to keep on going through the hardship of everyday life.
Who knows how often they thought about it?
How often they heard that voice saying *Listen to Him!*

This happens right in the middle of the Gospel of Mark,
in the middle of Jesus' ministry---
it's a *touchstone* for them to come back to,
as they go forward through the valleys of life.

What about you?
Do you find *inspiration or energy* from your mountaintop experience?
Does it remind you that *God is good?*
Does it give you *a place to go* to in your heart and mind, when life is tough?

I believe these mountaintop experiences
Can give us *strength and inspiration* for daily life.
The *everyday struggle* of life in the valley.

Do you think that's *true?*
Is it true for you?

I mean, *no one can stay up* on the mountain,
eventually we all have to come down to daily life.

Just like the disciples, we go up after having been down in the valley, and then we come back down the mountaintop experience to real life.

Jesus and Peter, James and John left the mountain and came down to serve—to heal the sick, and help the poor, to welcome the sinner and outcast.

Could the same be true for us?

Those mountaintop experiences that we have with God—
they can give us *energy and imagination to serve one another*.
Kind of like *God pouring life* into us,
so we can pour it into others.

Have you ever heard the analogy of an *emotional love tank*?
Gary Chapman who wrote about the five love languages uses that.

Or what about filling up your *emotional bucket*?

Amy told me about a NY Times bestseller called “*How Full Is Your Bucket?*”—
and it’s based on a simple analogy.

Our hearts are like buckets, and each interaction we have in the world
either *fills it with the positive*, or *dips out of it with the negative*.

Every time we interact with one another we are either being *filled* up,
Or someone is *dipping* out from our bucket.

If our bucket is *full*, we can *love and serve* one another
in ways that we can’t if our bucket is empty. Rath, Tom, and Clifton, Donald O. *How Full Is Your Bucket*, Gallup: New York, 2004.

I think these incredible experiences with God can *fill our buckets*,
and *fill our hearts*.

And while I *don’t believe that we can manufacture* such experiences,
or cause them to happen...

I do believe we *make space for them* to happen in our lives,
if we’re not too busy to slow down..

We have to *schedule some time away* from the treadmill of life,
we have to *make time* to get away from daily grind,
and *pay more attention* to our Creator, to our Savior.

Jesus took Peter, James and John away to that mountain.

In fact, Jesus often took his disciples away from the crowds to rest and learn.

Jesus himself went away alone often to *pray and spend time* with God.

Last week we talked about how important it is to take the time to be alone with God, *to wait on God*—that’s when we find ourselves strengthened and renewed, just like we read in Isaiah 40.

What about you?

Are you making time to *get away and pray*,
Are you making time to *spend alone* with God?
What about to just *see the beauty* of God’s creation?

I know firsthand, how hard it is *to get off the treadmill*.
So much of it seems so *good and positive*,
because we may be helping and serving ...
but how will our emotional tanks be filled
if we are continually *pouring it out* to others?
We need time alone with God to be *filled up, to be inspired, to gain strength*.

I would say our passage today calls us to
remember the times
we felt close to God—where were you? What were you doing?
And how can you make space for an encounter with God, again?

How can you *draw back to the same God*
who was there for you then, and wants to be there for you now?

We all have to *make time*,
for those times of *inspiration*.
As I was working I started to think of a few good ideas..can you think of some?

What about getting up earlier to watch the *sunrise*.
Stay up late and look at the *stars*.
Take a day away and walk along a *lake*, or take a *hike* outside.
Curl up with your *Bible* and some beautiful *music*.
Visit an *art museum*, and linger at your favorite pieces.

But most of all, *ask God to be there with you, and for you*,
To *fill you back up* with the energy, imagination, and strength you need
To keep on going...day after day, through the everyday valleys.

Peter, James, and John heard an important message up there:

listen to Him!

Those three words summed up the whole experience,
and gave them something to do once they left the mountaintop.

How ***do we obey*** that message, today? ***Listen to Him!***

Those words are for us too---

Notice that after the voice, Jesus didn't preach to them on that mountain.
He took them back down the mountain to live in the daily valleys of life.

The same happens to us.

We go up on the mountain

We have a ***big transforming moment***, or ***maybe it's a more subtle*** experience.....

*The smile of a child, the success of a student, the progress of a patient,
a word of encouragement, or praise.*

And those moments ***bring joy*** to the valleys of everyday life,

And ***strength and encouragement*** when we need it the most.

We can't make the experiences happen,

but we can ***make ourselves available*** to meet with God,

to be alone with God, to surrender to God.

If we are willing, ***God will meet us wherever we are.***

Every time we come to this place of worship,

Anytime we make a space for God,

that's when we can catch a glimpse of his glory.

That's when we can ***find strength*** for valleys.

And we can find ourselves ***changed by the voice of God***—

guiding, directing, and forgiving us.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first of the 40 days of Lent—
our time of preparation for Easter.

It's the perfect time to obey those three important words:

Listen to Him!

Lent is a season to listen to Jesus.

It's the perfect season to take time and listen—

For we are preparing for the joy of Easter!

On ***Ash Wednesday we enter a valley***, so to speak.

Because it is a day when we face our own ***sin, failures, and mortality.***

On Ash Wednesday we come before God to *confess our sins*,
 And here in this church we write some down on slips of paper,
 And we actually *nail them to a big wooden cross*.

We come forward for *communion*—our spiritual food and drink for the journey—
 and we receive the *sign of the cross in ashes* on our foreheads,
 as we hear these words:
Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Why?

Because when we acknowledge *who we really are*,
 Then we really know *who Jesus is*, and *what He did for us* on the cross.

That *amazing grace* of Jesus is all the more amazing
When we know why we need it.
 And I think we know that we need it,
 The question is, do we believe that God gives it to *US—as a free gift?*
 Nothing we have done or not done earns us the love of God,
 We are simply *forgiven because we are children* of God, in need of a Savior.

This year during Lent, we'll focus on *people that Jesus met*,
 And *what he gave them*---*new life, salvation, healing, living water.*
 Each week we hear another story about a life transformed,
 by an encounter with Jesus.

And each week you'll be able to *go to the Café* and make some *prayer beads*—
 Kind of a like a Presbyterian rosary.
 It's a simple way to *make something you can carry with you*—
 to remind you to pray—for people, for situations, for yourself.

I think these *stories* throughout Lent,
 And the opportunity to *create something* with our hands,
 Will enrich our journey as we prepare for Easter.

Friends, hear the *Good News* of the Gospel today:
 Those times on the mountain with God,
 They give us the *inspiration and strength* to make it through the valleys of life.
 May we *make time* to be with God this Lenten season,
 And most of all, may we *Listen to Jesus*.
 Amen.