

Psalm 125

- ¹ Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
- ² As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people,
from this time on and for evermore.
- ³ For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous may not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.
- ⁴ Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.
- ⁵ But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.
Peace be upon Israel!

Season of Creation 2: Mountaintop Experiences

There are a lot of mountaintop experiences described in the Bible. Can you name a few? Noah's ark finally made landfall on Mount Ararat. Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac on a mountain in the land of Moriah. Moses sees the burning bush on Mount Horeb and receives the Torah possibly on the same mountain. Jesus gives a sermon on the mountain, and is transfigured on a mountain. And of course Jerusalem is built on a little mountain – more like a plateau but the high point is called Mount Zion. This is where the Jerusalem Temple was built by Solomon and later rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah, and of course lots of mountaintop experiences occurred there as the Temple was the throne of God – the prophet Isaiah had his encounter. Other prophets had theirs. It's no surprise that Mount Zion is considered holy ground by three religions.

Well we all have mountaintop experiences, or at least we should have such experiences, because God created us to enjoy life. Last week, our first week in this Season of Creation, I spoke about being wonderfully and beautifully made and we read from Song of Songs which was a steamy account of the romantic love between a man and a woman, and I mentioned how romantic love between two individuals is indeed a mountaintop experience – indeed you could be on the most beautiful mountaintop in all creation but if you're in love you would hardly even notice the landscape as your mind would be so fixated on the one you're in love with. Such an experience is a gift from God, and it's God's intention that we relish such feelings and such experiences.

So today I'm going to talk about mountaintop experiences as they relate directly to God. I think that they are experiences that God, out of love, wants us to enjoy. And I want to describe to you THREE types of mountaintop experiences that happen to correspond to the TRIUNE nature of God, what we often refer to as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but to be more descriptive I will refer to as CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND SANCTIFIER.

And in our lifetime it is God's good will that we experience God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, which means that we interact with God in a way; if you experience God it means that God is revealing something to you and you are comprehending what he is revealing. And in that interaction with God there is joy in heaven and on earth, which is God's will for us.

So what are these mountaintop experiences that God desires us to have?

Let me start by sharing a little bit about my own literal mountaintop experiences last April. I went with my family to South Korea and while there climbed 3 legitimate mountains, one being Gwanak Mountain. Gwanak Mountain. The view is breathtaking (as was the climb up the mountain), I don't know how anyone can look down from a mountaintop and NOT feel some powerful emotions, some amazement at the world – of Mount Zion which is surrounded by other mountains, and the author literally sees God surrounding people like those mountains surround Jerusalem. In a way God is drawing the author into his presence through natural beauty, and the author acknowledges God as the creator of such beauty. It's as if God is saying, "Hello" to us when we see the beauty of creation. And our natural response should be a desire to get to know this creator, to build a closer relationship with God, and to congratulate God for the beauty of creation, to write songs about him, to sing things like we sang earlier: "The universe declares your majesty."

And we all seem to acknowledge such majesty, such beauty...and recognize when that beauty is spoiled. And it's usually spoiled by human interference. When we consider what is ugly about this world, it is man-made or human-made. We pollute the environment, and we wage war on one another, leaving the earth scorched and poisoned.

So one of our reactions to the literal desecration of creation should be repentance; we should recognize our responsibility in spoiling our environment, but because we are all spoiled by sin we very often cast the blame on the worst offenders and deny our own culpability. We can look out the window to the person who is not recycling their garbage while we ourselves continue to burn fossil fuels and throw out a tremendous amount of plastic and forget to turn the water off when our lawn is watered. Our reaction should be shame, but it ends up being blame. If we are truly serious about having a relationship with God we need to get past blaming others and see that part of the problem rests inside US, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Which brings me to the second mountaintop experience that God desires us to have – REDEMPTION. I have to be humbled and repent of my self-righteousness. I can speak out against destroying the environment and I can speak out against human trafficking, but if I'm honest with myself I can find that I am complicit in environmental destruction when I choose to drive a large car that burns fossil fuels, and I'm complicit in human trafficking when I purchase a shirt that looks nice on me when I think only about the price and the way it looks on me and fail to think about the working conditions and pay of those who manufactured this shirt. The evil that I'm so apt to recognize outside of me also lurks within me, and inasmuch as my heart seeks God I cannot ignore it.

There's a temptation to find consolation from people who say, "everybody does that," but that just identifies me as one of many who sin against God and neighbor. Everybody is in need of redemption, and everybody comes to the conclusion that we cannot redeem ourselves.

So in steps Jesus, God's love and grace communicated to us directly in human form. Jesus' crucifixion draws our attention to our own sin, to the evil residing within us, and evil that is capable of killing an innocent person. Who killed Jesus? I remember watching an interview with George W. Bush who was asked that very question and answered quite correctly, "We all did." Paul puts it succinctly in 2 Corinthians 5:21.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Paul must have been distraught over his own complicity in murder but discovered a joy beyond measure when he experienced grace beyond measure – he speaks of grace over 80 times in his letters. God's grace in Christ has brought us up from the pit and onto a mountaintop, and to know that grace through Jesus Christ is certainly a mountaintop experience. To know what it is to be "born again" in Christ, to be redeemed from sin and death brings joy beyond measure.

But in the same way that we can fail to appreciate the beauty of God's creation if our nose is in our smartphone when we stand on a mountaintop, we cannot appreciate redemption if we ignore the sin that resides within us. If you think there's nothing wrong you don't bother to seek a cure. Only when we appreciate the weight of our sin can we appreciate the magnificence of God's grace.

Yet we cannot expect that mountaintop experience to last indefinitely. Just as God responds to our repentance with an assurance of salvation, we now must respond to God's redeeming act in Christ. How do we do this? By loving Christ. And if we love Christ, we obey Christ. We go and do the things that he commands us to do, tending to the needs of the world, spreading the good news of God's kingdom come. And our sinful nature makes this hard for us at times; we're prone to shrink from the task Christ sets before us in favor of finding safety and comfort in our own little kingdoms. Fortunately Christ equips us for the task at hand with the Holy Spirit who gives us a vision of God's kingdom in order that we can choose the right path. The Spirit convicts us when we sin as it comforts us when we suffer for our faith. The Spirit leads us in paths of righteousness for his name sake (Psalm 23). And so the third mountaintop experience that I would relate to you may be less of an ecstatic experience as it is a sense of peace that comes from walking with the Lord on a path that may lead us to that mountaintop, a path that will take our entire life to complete, a path that may have some difficult terrain but also has some spectacular views. It's a path upon which we carry the cross Jesus commands us to carry, where we share in Christ's suffering, but it's a path that leads us to glory in Christ. May God open our eyes to see the magnificence of this world, to recognize our need for a Savior, and to guide us on that path that leads us ever higher. Amen.