

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

How many here have been to Disney World? Did you go on space mountain?

It has been a long time for me but I can still remember the ride. Maybe it is better to say that I can still remember the feeling of the ride. It was amazing. Flying through the darkness. Noises blaring, lights flashing, the car that I was in plunging and rising and turning. My heart was racing. A big grin on my face. My senses on overload. Adrenaline pulsing through my veins. Wiped out at the end. And when it was all done, I ran to get back in line to do it again. We like our excitement, don't we?

In our daily lives we describe an experience like that as a rush. In religious context, however, we have a different name for it. We call it a mountaintop experience.

Have you ever had one of those? Or two of those? Or maybe many? As you probably know, a mountaintop experience was named after the experience that Peter and James and John had when they went with Jesus and witnessed his visit with Moses and Elijah. It is defined loosely as any exciting and uplifting and revelatory experience of God in a place away from the world. We hear about mountaintop experiences at places like a Cursillo weekend where people go away for a few days and focus on God and their spiritual lives.

And then we are told that we can't stay there. Just like Peter and James and John we have to return to the world. And so, we do. We go back to the often hum-drum, plain-ol' routine that we normally live, by comparison. Going to work, shopping, taking our kids or grandkids to

soccer practice, watching our favorite TV shows...going to church. We fall into what is by comparison an unexcited living out of normality. The excitement and adrenaline are left up there on the mountain. And we come down and await the next opportunity to go back up.

And there lies the problem. One theologian described a mountaintop experience as a symbolic event of God's revelation. I'm not quite sure where the symbolic idea is coming from, but it is an event where we draw closer to God. It is a time of personal joy and excitement that serves to give an individual the tinglies. You know what I mean, right? It is an emotional high where your heart races, a grin fills your face, your senses get elevated, and adrenaline pulses...you know kind of like Space Mountain. And all we want is to get back in line for the next ride. And there is where I think we miss the point.

Here is what I have come to believe. God does not give us mountaintop experiences. At least, he does not give us those experiences for the end goal of us getting the tinglies. Before their little trip up the mountain Jesus did not go to Peter, James, and John and say, "Hey guys, come with me I am going to show you something that is going to feel really cool!" His intent, I think, was different. His purpose was to reveal to them something that was extremely powerful and meaningful and life-changing. And then told them not to share it quite yet, taking away the danger of them focusing on the high instead of the purpose.

So, if they are not mountaintop experiences, if God does not deliver to us emotional experiences of his presence solely for the purpose of our personal highs and emotional delights, then what are we looking at when we hear the story of the transfiguration. Well, I have come to use another term for these types of experiences. I have come to call them "launch pad experiences." I know, it doesn't role of the tongue like the other terminology, but it just might better explain the fullness of what is happening. Now, follow me on this, because I am not suggesting that God does not give us revelatory experiences that fill us with joy and excitement. Clearly, he does. I am saying that I don't think that is the main purpose. If anything, the joy and excitement are more of byproducts of something much bigger.

I think they are best described as "Launch Pad Experiences." While a mountaintop experience is personal, a launch pad experience is missional. This is the way that Martin Luther King put it in his famous "I have been to the mountaintop" sermon. After telling everyone that he had been to the mountaintop, he went on to say that because of that all things except for one, don't matter anymore. And that "one thing" was that he would do the will of God. He had been to the mountaintop and his purpose, his plan, his determination was to just simply and powerfully do God's will.

While a mountaintop experience is seen as an emotional event, a launch pad experience is an equipping and sending one. Notice the conversation that Moses and Elijah had with Jesus. They met with the purpose of talking about his departure, the completion on his mission. When they had departed, Jesus turned to the disciples and didn't say, "Wow! Wasn't that the coolest thing you've ever seen. He said, "Get up, and don't be afraid." It wasn't primarily about the

personal rush. It was about better connecting to the mission of God. Get up! There are things to do. Don't be afraid, because you're all going to play a part.

While a mountaintop experience is personally joyful and uplifting and exciting, it can only be fully so by being missional within God's plan for the world. What we tend to do is live the excitement of mountaintop experiences in the moment and then we return to our normal lives with a great memory to talk about in church circles. But God does not call us to the mountaintop in order to give us a great new entry in our personal diary. God calls us to the launch pad. He calls us away from the world to a separate place so that we can be readied, and fueled, and aimed, and filled with excitement, and uplifted in joy...so that we might then be launched into the life of mission that he calls each one of us to.

Without embracing the mission, we become a group of people who get together to reminisce and talk about a God who lives on a mountain and builds rockets, instead of telling about a God who lives within each of us and invites all people to launch and to fly.

Amen