ReMARKable: Mountaintop Experience Memory Verse: Mark 9:23

March 9, 2025 Scripture Reading: Mark 9

**[SLIDE 1]**

 Today, as we look at Mark 9, I want you to think of a moment in your life that you might describe as a mountaintop experience. **[SLIDE 2]** We call them that for a reason. Being on top of a mountain gives you a thrilling sense of perspective. You feel free and unfettered. You are in a unique place, above all the noise and clamor of everyday life. In addition to literally being on a mountaintop, we refer to many experiences this way. Maybe it was a first date or a wedding day, maybe it was an award that you earned or a championship game that you won. In church circles, we tend to spiritualize this term, “mountaintop experience”. It could be a mission trip, or a retreat of some sort. It could be a particular worship service or an intense time of prayer. Whenever God reaches out to us in a special or unique way, whenever he touches our lives and makes his presence known, we might refer to those times as mountaintop experiences.

 One of my more recent mountaintop moments came after the birth of our daughter Magdala. (PIC) **[SLIDE 3]** She was a healthy baby and the delivery went well, but there was a problem with her blood-type. She had excessive red-blood cells. Maggie was jaundiced and became more so as the days went by. Her body was unable to get rid of bilirubin fast enough. This condition made her drowsy and unalert. We were told that she would likely begin to sustain brain damage and need a blood transfusion if things did not turn around.

 We had to spend a few days in the ICU as she received constant blue light treatment. (PIC) **[SLIDE 4]** We prayed, we waited, but I’ll tell you, we did not worry. The situation was in God’s hands. So, for me, looking back, those three days with our newborn in the hospital have become a mountaintop. We were made strong in our weakness. We were provided for in a time of helplessness. Our daughter was saved and healed and God made himself known to us in a special way.

 Biblically speaking, we have good precedence for using the term “mountaintop experience” **SLIDE 5]** because throughout the bible, God reaches out to people on physical mountaintops. Abraham’s faith is tested on top of Mt. Moriah, Moses receives the Ten Commandments on top of Mt. Sinai, Elijah calls down fire from heaven on top of Mt. Carmel, and today we are going to see Jesus and a few of his disciples have a unique experience with God on top of an unnamed, very high mountain according to Mark.

 The beginning of chapter 9 seems to be the tail-end of chapter 8. Jesus is laying out very clearly the principles of discipleship. We follow after Jesus by taking up our crosses and dying to ourselves and giving up our lives for his sake. He says, **[SLIDE 6]** “There are some standing here who will not die before they see God’s kingdom come in power.” Now, on its face Jesus seems to be talking about the end of time, the second coming when Christ returns in glory. Well, that time is still to come. We are many, many generations after Jesus spoke these words. Was he mistaken? It is more likely that we are the ones who are mistaken. There are many opinions floating around about what Jesus meant by these words. Looking through the rest of the New Testament, maybe Jesus is making reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. That was an event that revealed the glory of God’s kingdom. Maybe Jesus was referencing the very next event to follow in Marks gospel report. Today we call it the Transfiguration **[SLIDE 7]** and it was the ultimate of mountaintop experiences. It was a time when some standing there would see God’s kingdom come in power.

 Jesus took a select few: just Peter, James and John, to a very high mountain and there Jesus’ appearance changed. He became dazzling white, an indication of purity and holiness. The disciples had heard of such a thing from the old, old stories about Moses. After meeting with God on the mountaintop, his face radiated with glory. It unnerved the people. He had to wear a veil. As the disciples are reminded of this story, just like that, Moses himself appears, the one who received and taught God’s law. And then, out of nowhere, Elijah appears as well! He was considered to be the greatest of all the prophets. Peter and the others were terrified! They had no explanation as to what was going on, they had no capacity to understand. But Peter can at least grasp that what is going on is a good thing. He would like to make it last as long as possible so he suggests building, what the CEB calls, three shrines. This is a little misleading. Peter is not attempting to construct some sort of idol to use to worship his spiritual heroes. The Greek word is actually *skene* **[SLIDE 8]** and it just means tent. Peter is trying to be hospitable to these very unusual guests. But the next thing he knows, a cloud covers them, and a voice speaks, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” And then, it was all over. Verse 9, they were coming back down the mountain again.

 That is the thing about mountaintop experiences…they are **[SLIDE 9]** fleeting and short lived. They cannot last, but the impression they make, the memory they create lasts forever. The experience with God, in and of itself, does not last, yet it produces results, it leaves us changed, transfigured if you will. And memories of these moments are what the disciples are going to have to go on, because they are commanded to not speak of what they had seen. And yet, this prohibition comes with a timeline. They are to remain silent until the Son of Man rises from the dead. Then it will be time, time to share the true identity of Jesus, time to preach to all who have ears to hear.

 Once again, we identify with the **[SLIDE 10]** disciples here. We are as confused as they are. We have no explanation, as much as we might want one. On a very basic level, we can conclude that God cannot be explained. He will never be reduced to a formula. He will never fit inside a box of our own making. His plans are not our own. To suffer and die is, to our ears, a bad plan. It sounds exactly like the opposite of victory. It is so counter-intuitive that the disciples simply cannot absorb the meaning of Jesus’ words when he talks about dying and rising again.

 Jesus and the three meet up with the other disciples amid an argument, the center of which seems to be a child possessed by a demon. Mark lists many symptoms, all of which culminate in verse 22. This demon seeks to kill this boy by throwing him into fire or water. This is the main motive of Satan. In John 10:10 we read a summary of Satan’s operations in this world and in our lives. **[SLIDE 11]** He seeks to steal, kill and destroy. That is what we see at play in this child’s life. Verse 18 lets us know that the boy’s father has sought help from the disciples but they were unable to cast this demon out. Now, let us remember that these same disciples have done this job before. In Mark 6, they have been able to cast out demons in the name of Jesus…but, in this case, they can’t do it. In light of the disciple’s failure, the man’s faith seems to be shaken. He finally pleads with Jesus, “If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!” Jesus picks up on his lack of faith. “If? All things are possible for the one who has faith.” And verse 24 is a prayer that should be upon the lips of all of us; **[SLIDE 12]** “I have faith; help my lack of faith!”

As my wife and I sat in the ICU with our sick baby, all we could de was pray to God in faith. And sometimes when you utter those big, impossible prayers, you can come away feeling like a liar or a fraud. Sometimes you say the prayer not at all convinced that an answer is possible. Sometimes we have faith – just not much of it. So, we pray for healing in faith and at the same time ask for help with our lack of faith. Here, Jesus speaks to the demon and casts it out of the boy and the boy is healed.

 Afterwards the disciples cannot help but ask, in verse 28, “Why couldn’t we throw this spirit out?” Jesus replies that this kind of sprit requires prayer. So, the story combines together two of our greatest needs, **[SLIDE 13]** faith and prayer. The father lacked faith, and the disciples lacked prayer. Both are essential, both complete the other. Jesus sought time alone with God so that he could pray and strengthen his faith. We already mentioned how the disciples have cast out demons before. They had experienced and exercised the incredible power and authority of God. And yet, they did not maintain that power through a vital prayer life. The gift they had received had, over time, lost its efficacy. This is something that can happen to us all. We have all been graced with certain gifts and abilities. These gifts were given so that we might glorify the Lord with them, to please and honor him, to serve others with them. But the powerful dynamic of our giftings can fade if we neglect to immerse them in prayer. Lamar Williamson puts it well, **[SLIDE 14]** “prayerlessness results in powerlessness.”

 In verse 30 Jesus seeks to spend some time away with just his disciples. Jesus’ public ministry is coming to an end, and he has some important and straightforward things to tell his followers. It’s tough news to tell. It’s all about how he must die at the hands of men and then rise in three days. Mark observes that even though the disciples don’t understand, they are too afraid to ask Jesus to elaborate or explain further. It is like hearing from the doctor that you have a terrible disease. You are stunned by the news, and, in that moment, you really don’t want to know all the details. Knowing more information seems like it would make things worse. The disciples feel like they just can’t stomach any more bad news about Jesus’ coming days. **[SLIDE 15]**

 ((Verse 35, Jesus sits down to teach his disciples. This physical posture indicates a time of formal teaching. This is serious stuff. Jesus is going to firmly correct the disciples and their notion of greatness. Military might, social status, wealth – none of that is great. Greatness looks like service to others. Greatness looks like a child, like one who is lowly. True greatness is the inverse of the normal pattern set out by this world. Those who welcome little children, who host the helpless, who assist those who are unable to pay you back, who care for those who might be a burden…When you welcome them we actually welcome Jesus and when we welcome Jesus we are actually welcoming the One who sent him.)) This is an explicit reference the divine nature of Jesus Christ. It is more than a hint to the fact we proclaim today, Jesus is God, welcoming the Son includes the Father, the two are one.

 **[SLIDE 16]** Verse 42 Jesus has some very harsh words for those who would seek to cause these little ones to stumble or fall into sin. In fact, if any part of us, be it hand or foot or eye, should cause us to sin, we would be better off living without that part of our body. Though Jesus is hyperbolic here with his suggestion that we actually maim ourselves, he is relating a picture of the very real and dire consequences of sin. **[SLIDE 17]** Sin will be punished, and hell will be eternal. We cannot underestimate the severity of what it means to be separated from God. Jesus has already made clear in Mark’s gospel that we are defiled by the things that come from our hearts. Sin is an internal problem. The source lies within us. It is clear that my hands, and feet, and eyes, while they can carry out sinful deeds, they are not the source of my sinfulness. If I were blind, if I had no hands or feet, I would still be capable of sinning. This is why we need to remove from our lives those things that trip us up. A recovering alcoholic should not spend time in a bar, a glutton should avoid buffets…there are certain habits, certain parts of our life that need to go for the sake of Christ.

 That is why Jesus begins talking about salt. **[SLIDE 18]** Verse 49, to be salted with fire is a reference to Leviticus 2:13 where God lays out rules for offering sacrifices. These sacrifices need to be covered in salt. Salt is a purifying agent, a preservative. We ought to live as salty Christians. We bring a preserving effect to the communities and cultures we inhabit. We bring the flavor of the kingdom to our surroundings. Jesus ties the idea of saltiness to the idea of sacrifices. Paul picks up on this when he speaks to the Romans about being living sacrifices. We are salted, we are purified, we do away with sin, and we live in faith.

 I can recall as Magdala lay motionless in her blue bed, **[SLIDE 19]** my wife and I had to come to Jesus. As we prayed for her healing, we boldly declared our faith and at the same time wondered in our hearts, **[SLIDE 20]**“Could she be healed?” Then come the words of Jesus in verse 23, **[SLIDE 21]**“All things are possible for the one who has faith.” We simply had to trust in God.

 In our time at the ICU, at the little lounge area, we met another couple whose baby was in much worse condition than Maggie was. Their son was born about 16 weeks too early and needed intervention at every level. As we listened to their story, we tried to share with them the salt of our own faith that preserves and sustains our lives. I don’t know how those seeds fell. I don’t know how their story ended, but I do no know that in the midst of their trial and sadness, that even in the ICU, God is present, God is revealing himself. Even the valleys can be mountaintop experiences.

 So, what are your mountaintops? Where and when has God reached out especially to you? Remember these moments. Take them with you into the fray. Allow these moments to strengthen your faith so that you can live as salt to those around you. Amen.