

Sunday, September 12, 2021 – Holy Mountains I

“Mountains of Righteousness”

Psalm 36: 6; Exodus 3: 1-14; 2 Peter 1: 12-21; Mark 9: 2-8

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today marks the beginning of a brief series as we approach the first anniversary of our Forward in Freedom capital campaign, connected to the very name of this ministry outpost in the Northwest of Las Vegas that we call Mountain View. This series, Holy Mountains, will have us explore the themes of righteousness in today’s sermon, perspective next week and salvation on September 26, all connected to mountains in the Bible – and in so doing, orient us toward what God is doing here among us today and in the years to come.

Our typical vibrant blue skies full of sun 300+ days per year have been blunted a lot this summer, haven’t they? Between higher-than-normal monsoon moisture and a blanket of smoke from all those fires up north it’s a joy when you have a day like today.

It makes you not take quite so for granted those beautiful, rugged mountains, hugging our valley on all sides with playful contours and lines, light and shadow. And they serve as a helpful tool to orient you and help you navigate as well, if you’re not so adept at intuitively getting the cardinal directions of north, south, east and west. After you’ve lived here awhile they even almost just dip into the background, barely noticeable and under-appreciated. They’re always there.

That’s what the psalmist is getting it when he says that God’s righteousness is as of the mountains of God. Beautiful, ancient and everlasting, a symbol of strength... and often not noticed and under-appreciated in the best of times.

Our Old Testament text from Exodus has Moses at a holy mountain. Moses is drawn by a curious sight – a bush that is on fire but isn’t being consumed. God’s voice, God’s Word, comes from the bush. God instructs Moses to remove his sandals – he is standing on holy ground. Moses is sent to speak God’s Word to the Pharaoh in Egypt to set His people free from slavery. And Moses is given a name to share – He is speaking for the God named Yahweh. Now, Yahweh is a personal name that means “I am who I am.” There’s some ambiguity to the tense, it’s something like, I always was, I am now and I will always be. A name that drives at a God who is even more ancient and everlasting, stalwart and present than the

mountain where Moses stood and talked to God. It was this very same mountain on which God later taught His people what righteousness was all about, how to live their new life in Him through those Ten Words that we explored in detail all summer long, in all of their ancient and everlasting relevance to your life and mine today. His voice, speaking directly to Moses this time not out of a bush but out of the mountain.

This is the same point of the disciple Peter, writing to Christians in Judea when he recalls the events of our Gospel lesson on the Mount of Transfiguration. He writes, “16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.” Again, a mountain... again Moses is there, too... and again, the very voice of God. Not out of a bush, not out of the mountain, this time out of a cloud: “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!” Jesus is the very righteousness of God – living a life of perfection in the ways God instructed Moses and Israel. Listen to Him! That’s my Son! My Word!

Of course, sometimes we don’t understand what we’re hearing and seeing when it is right in front of us. That holy voice that commanded Moses to be His instrument to save the people through the fiery bush was met with excuse after excuse not to go to Egypt. The holy voice that commanded Moses to share what righteousness is through the Ten Words handed down at Sinai was being rebelled against in idol worship even as God was handing Moses the instruction. The very voice to whom the disciples were commanded to listen at the Transfiguration fell on deaf ears as later in this very chapter these disciples argue over who is the greatest, and fail to comprehend what Jesus has to say about His coming death.

You see that’s the thing about righteousness that is like the mountains of God – when we don’t see His righteousness at work or don’t understand what He’s doing we might assume he’s not even there.

There have been days this summer where you could barely see the mountains... perhaps at moments where they were completely concealed from view. It’s like how we sometimes think about God. Is God still at work? Is He looking out for us, ready to save, like He was ancient Israel? Are His commands relevant in 2021, like they were freshly inscribed in tablets of stone on Sinai? Are we

“listening to Him,” now resurrected and seated at the right hand of the Father and once again emanating that brilliant white and light instead of all the other noise in our lives that begs for attention and priority?

Where is God in the midst of all the tragedy that happens in our world on a daily basis? I think again to those mountains, veiled and hazy in that ugly smoke. Whatever ugliness in the world around us obscures us from seeing God, He hasn't gone anywhere, any more than the mountains are still as close as they always were, whether you see them or not. Whether we see Him clearly, barely or not at all, He is there, and He is leading us to righteousness. That invitation to righteousness resounds every time we gather to worship and open our Bibles – “Listen to Him!” Do you hear His voice? His Word speaks! Not out of a bush, not out of the mountain, not out of a cloud - His Word, present, living and active through this Book. His Word, ancient and everlasting calling YOU to eternal life in your baptism. His Word, giving you strength and endurance to walk back out into the smoke and into the noise and know that God has sunk Himself into your very flesh, taken and eaten, taken and drank. His Word through Spirit-filled interactions that do not resemble the noise and tragic divisions in the world around us but rather are mysteriously, powerfully united in Jesus.

God said to Moses at the fiery bush, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” Friends, we're participating in that very sign at this moment, enveloped in God's love and forgiveness. It is in fact the very purpose for which God has freed us to go forward. We are given courage to go into the places that are dark, scary, obscured and know that God is always with us, whether we see it and feel it or not. What happens here on a daily basis – in worship, in Bible studies and small groups, in our Christian day school and preschool is speaking that Word of God into people's lives and preparing them for life on God's mission out there. Jesus is the righteousness of God. We are called to righteousness here.

So as you hear about moving Forward in Freedom over the next couple of weeks, that's what it is. It's not a monument to greatness, or a building project, or a money grab, or a sideshow or substitute to “real ministry.” It's a part of that central piece of what we are all about – preparing our campus to facilitate the ancient and everlasting ministry of God among the people of both today and for years to come to hear Jesus. Jesus, whose perfect obedience and righteousness frees us by His death and

resurrection. May God bless us as we move forward with eyes to see and ears to hear Jesus, our righteousness who makes us right with God – especially when it’s hard to see through the smoke and hear through the noise. God is present, Jesus is here. In Jesus’ name, Amen.