

The Rev. Billy Cerveney:

Good morning. Good to see you. One of my favorite people that of recent years is, He just died a few years back. He was a US senator. His name was John McCain. Politics aside, if you've ever know, you knew his story. He actually lived in Jacksonville for a while. Some of y'all might have known him, or at least his kids.

But politics aside, he was an incredibly interesting guy. McCain was a fighter pilot in in World War Two. And, the World War two saw in Vietnam. Let's start over. Good morning. McCain was a fighter pilot in Vietnam, and at one point he was shot down over North Vietnam. Vietnam. He was taken to a prison camp there. He was taken to the Hanoi Hilton, which was not a wonderful place, as you can imagine.

And he broke his arm, and I believe his leg in the crash. And they were set improperly. And he was beaten. He was tortured. He didn't get proper medical help. He never he didn't get the right food. And when after the war ended and someone interviewed him, they said, Senator McCain, when you reflect over all the hardships of what it was to be in this prison camp, what was the hardest?

And he said, without question, the most difficult thing in all of it was the isolation. There was the lack of connection. He says, when you when you're not around other people, what happens is you tear free from your moorings in reality and you lose. You lose a perspective on yourself and you lose a perspective on the world and you, and you just don't know how to interact.

He said that when he was in prison one day, he woke up on his pallet on the floor and he hears the door slam on the other side of the wall in the cell next to him, and he hears a body moving. And one of the things the prisoners would do during that time is in order to stay connected, is they would write notes to each other and or they would tap Morse code on the wall, or they'd have these little ways of communicating just to people would know that they're not alone.

And what he did was he goes to the wall and he picked up a piece of rock or whatever he has, and he knocked on the wall. You remember the old the old, song Where to go shave in a haircut, six bits or two bits, whatever it is. And he'd knock on the wall. He'd go shave in a haircut.

And the person is supposed to reply, but he got nothing. And then he did it again.

And he did it again and again and no reply. And this went on for days and days happened for weeks. And then one day he's getting ready to give up. And McCain goes to the wall shaving a haircut. And there's a moment of silence. And then he hears.

And he begins to communicate with this person on the other side of the wall. And they begin to tap back and forth more, and they begin to Morse code, and they begin to communicate through various ways. And later, the person that was on the other side of the wall was interviewed and talking about his prison experience. And he said, I was in that cell and I was I was broken, I was dejected, I was on the edge of dying, and I had given up, and I laid there on the floor and I heard the tapping and it went on and on.

And then eventually I got it, called me back to the surface, and I reached out and I responded. And that connection gave me the hope and the courage to move on. It saved my life.

We love that story, don't we? And the reason is it's not just the good stories, because I connect to that foundationally. I connect to it foundationally because it's this I have this longing that's foundational in me. You have this longing, this foundational in you, you know, might not be aware of it, but I promise you it's there. And it's this longing for connection to belong, to be seen.

The reason you have that is God the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit was community in and of himself, relationship in and of himself. And he made you in his image. You were made for relationship. That's why God said in the in Genesis he says, it's not good that man should be alone. You'll lose perspective. You'll lose your reference point on reality.

And listen, you don't have to be in a jail cell, but we know what it means to be detached because so many of us in our lives, we live emotionally disconnected. We just talked about this in the Sunday school class, that what's going on in me. I can't bear what's going on inside of me. So I just disconnect from what I'm feeling.

And I disconnect with everyone around me. And I live in this sort of self-imposed isolation or spiritually. I disconnect with God. And as a Christian, so often, I don't know where God is, and I'm in a pain in my life. I'm going through a hard time. I'm experiencing loneliness or fear or shame, or there's tragedy that's come and I'm tapping on the walls of heaven.

I'm like, God, where are you? And it's silence. What do I do with that? Well, the beautiful thing is the scripture we just read in Matthew 17, Jesus speaks to the center of this place. Let me give you a little context, because context always matters for passages like this. In the previous chapter in chapter 16, Jesus is with his disciples and they're really far north of Jerusalem, in a city called Caesarea Philippi, which means nothing to us.

But what tesserae of Philippi was the city that was nestled at the foot of this very large mountain called Mount Hermon? And in that place there was a gentile region. And it's very hard to overstate how much this region was thought of, and during that time is a hotbed for spiritual activity, for the occult. The Second Temple. Judy, Jewish leaders would write volumes about what happened on Hermon.

They believed that when Satan rebelled against God and he got his entourage of angels to rebel against him, it was on Mount Hermon that they descended and they made a pact together. The city says Syria Philippi was owned by the Greeks, and at one point it was called Panis. And the reason they called it pennies. It was named after the Greek god Pan and Pan, if you don't know, and most of you don't, because I didn't really know this that well.

Pan was the God of chaos. It's where we get the word panic from. And they worship Pan here. And at the bottom of Mount Hermon they had this huge carved into the wall, this, this shrine to pan and then there was this large mouth of a cave, which they believe was the entranceway to the underworld. They believed it was quite literally to them the gates of hell.

So when Jesus is talking to Peter and his disciples in chapter 16 and he says, who are people saying, I am? And Peter says, I believe for the first time he professes, you are the Christ. He turns to Peter and he says, on this rock I will build my church.

And the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. He's standing in the shadow of Mount Hermon, where the gates of hell were. So in chapter 17, when we get to this, it says, after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John and his brother, and led them up on this high mountain by themselves. Now, listen, I'm not Peter, I'm not James, I'm not John.

But I can imagine that if I am them, knowing what I know about this place, I'm standing on the mountain. I'm looking to my left. Am I right? I'm like, what are we doing here? This is insane. Why are we here?

They're all on top of this mountain that's pregnant with spiritual implication. Jesus brings his inner circle up there, and he begins to pull back the curtain on his identity. And Jesus begins to reveal his mission says in verse two, and he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

In other places in the other Gospels, it tells a story. It says it was bleached his clothes look white, far wider than any bleach could make them. And behold, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with them. You can understand the disciples at this moment. They are understandably blown away. But here's Peter and Peter I love Peter.

Peter, is this ready, aim, fire guy? He just starts talking before he even thinks. And he's. And he sees Moses and Elijah. And this is profound, glorious moment. And he's thinking to myself, this is amazing. This is what we've been waiting for. And he wants to freeze it, and he wants to build these three tents. And the in the middle of him talking about Jesus, let us build these three tents.

The father interrupts him, the voice of the father from heaven. And it says, This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. And the apostles collapse in fear. You know,

there's a couple things I want you to see in this passage and help us see what's going on here, because there's great. So you can't read this story and not get pictures or at least whiffs.

And this is very reminiscent of what happened to Moses on Mount Sinai. We just read this in Exodus. In Exodus chapter 33, Moses goes up on the mountain to meet with God, and he says, God, I want to see you. And God says, Hey, Moses, you don't work that way. I'm too glorious. If you were to look at me, no man can look on God and live.

No man can live. But where's I'm going to do. Moses, I want you to go, and I want to tuck you into the cleft of this rock. So Moses goes in, and he. And he hides himself in the cleft of the rock with let's God's shadow, just his shadow, pass over him. He doesn't even look upon him.

And in verse, in chapter 34 and X's, it says, Moses comes down and his face is glowing. As he is reflecting the glory of God.

And it feels like this to like this to Peter. But now you see Elijah and you're in it. You see Moses and he wants to freeze this moment. He says, let me build these three tents, because when he's doing that, he's like, well, put Moses here and Elijah here, and Jesus here in some way. He's saying that they're he's kind of putting them in the same category that they're divinely touched by God.

But the big difference in this is in Exodus, when Moses came up and he encountered the shadow of God, Moses is reflecting like a mirror. He's reflecting God's glory. In Matthew 17, Jesus is radiating it. It's coming out of him. And what he's doing in that moment he's unveiling Jesus is not momentarily becoming something that he's not. So he will come back in a minute and go back to what he what he is.

He's not momentarily becoming, this is emanating, this glory of God to let it go and go back to just being a regular person in that moment. What he is doing is he's unveiling what he is, the fullness of what he is. Yahweh, whose glory Moses could not stand in the presence of, lest he be incinerated. And God says, this is my beloved son, with whom I'm well pleased.

So much in this. This is when there's men. They collapse in fear, in the glory, in the presence of God. And what God is saying in that moment, he's saying is wonderful. It is for you to see Elijah is wonderful, it is for you to see Moses. Jesus is not just another prophet. He's not just another priest.

He's my son. And when he says that is his coronation language, Yahweh was declaring, Jesus is Yahweh God. He is not equal to Elijah. He is not equal to Moses. What he's saying is all these gods, all these, these rebellious angels that have fallen, all the principalities, all the thrones, he is Lord over it all. What he's saying is this, this, these, this pan that they worship.

He is over all of it. He's not just some prophet to be listened to or some priest to follow. He is God Himself. He is greater than any heavenly being in this story that you guys are talking about right now. Jesus owns the story, but the story that he owns is very different than the one that they're used to.

Let me tell you why. You see, even in the ancient world again, context matters. In the ancient world, mountains were really familiar places for worship in the ancient world, you always found that the gods of other religions would always end up on a mountain you had. The Greek gods would be up on Olympus, right? You had. The Canaanite gods would be up on Mount Zafar, on.

You saw Moses that went up to meet with God on Sinai. That's why when you in ancient cultures, they would build these things called ziggurats, which were these sort of pyramid looking, mountain looking things where gods where they could worship gods because it was these simulated mountaintop so they could see God. But in all those ancient religions, they did that.

The reason they did that, that they had those gods, those gods went to the mountains so they could get away from people. They got there where they could go, and they would not be bothered by the pesky humans, their incessant needs. It was their way to escape humanity. But when you read in chapter 17, when you read of what's happening in with Jesus here, Jesus who owns the story, it's a different story because on this mountain, it's where Jesus comes to invite humanity into the larger story.

It's where he comes in and he says, come to me, I want to be with you. And it's a story that we can't see on our own. And the same way that Jesus's identity on the mountain had to be revealed, this story, it's got to be revealed to us by God.

That's pretty neat stuff. Let me ask you. So what they we saw was that being a good story, why does that matter to me? Because the God we serve when we consider the stories we live, he is not detached from our story. He's the author of creation. He's the one who spoke all things into existence. He is the one that breathes life into man.

He doesn't sit back and admire his work like a some book on a shelf that he once wrote and be like, man, I did that. That was great. It's not like he, while on the clock, set it on the counter and just letting it one down until enough time has passed. It's different what you see in Matthew 17, and you see with Jesus in every moment around the gospel stories, is that this story God had didn't just write it, he's written himself into it.

The author of the story is the main character of our story. He's written himself in it. And if he has written himself into your story, I assure you this. Hear me. If you hear one thing I say today, hear this. Your story is of eternal significance. It matters. You matter. It's true. As insignificant as you might feel, as forgotten as you might feel, as broken as your story might be.

I know we all have stories, and I know every one of your stories is not one that there's at least pieces of it. You never would have written this for yourself, but the Lord knows because you're a part of a story. You can't see the fullness of it, and it's one of eternal significance. I goes deeper and Peter and James and John, they hear the voice of God.

And what happens? They collapse in fear. They are huddled there facing the glory that would have incinerated Moses, their faith in the glory that in the Holy of Holies in the temple, they had to put it in the inner sanctum that no one could go to, lest you die the glory whose name was Yahweh? Yahweh, a name they weren't ever or even allowed to speak, because it was too holy.

You know, when you read your Old Testament and you read in a passage of Scripture, it is like something, something, something. And then you see the word Lord, and the Lord's written in all

capitals. You know, I'm talked about that's not the word Lord. It's the word is Yahweh. But in those times they believe the name was too holy, it was too precious.

You couldn't even write it. So they used a circumlocution. They used to a placeholder to write the word Yahweh. That's how they were, this glory. And they are crumpled to the ground in begging or in fear that they're going to be incinerated by the holiness of God. And what happens in that moment? What happens in that moment? In the story?

Verse seven. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, rise, have no fear.

You see why this matters? This is why it matters. Because this God, who had every right to build himself on a palace on top of the mountain, this God that had every right to isolate himself, he didn't. Not only did he write himself into the story, but look at the way he wrote himself into the story. He chose to leave his heavenly dwelling place to come down on a mountain, not to flex, not to appear as a fireball.

He came and he had this moment. He had the greatest glory we see expressed in Jesus on this transfiguration, in this transfiguration on the mountain was the prayer, prepare him for the greatest suffering that he would experience in the valley. He went down so he could experience abandonment in Gethsemane, and he would be alone when his disciples weren't there.

When he goes in trial before the high priest, he is abandoned and denied, and he is alone. When he climbs up on that cross, he is standing there alone when he is about to die. In the loneliest moment ever recorded in human history, Jesus turns to the father and quoting Psalm 22, he's saying, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me alone?

And he goes into the tomb alone. Why did he do that? So you would never have to.

So with whatever you're going through now, you would never be alone. You would never experience the abandonment he experienced. You never experienced the rejection he experienced. You would never experience the existential blackness that Jesus experienced in

those moments. So for us in this moment, when we sit here and we think about this for the Transfiguration, it is this glorious picture of the of the resurrected Jesus is a foreshadowing of what's to come for him and for us.

It's a beautiful thing. But that glory, that spirit that you see in Jesus in Matthew 17, don't miss this. That very thing was poured out on you at Pentecost, that holiness that was unapproachable, that holiness that we see radiating from Jesus, was put inside of you and me as Christians. Christ in you, the hope of glory in me always.

That is such good news. That is good salvation. Let me tell you why that's good, because guess what? I don't need a God that just tolerates me. I don't I don't need a God that just sits on top of a mountain and occasionally gives me access to him to meet with him so I can get instructions and go down and do my life on my own in the valley.

I don't need that. What I need is a God that is willing. A God of grace is willing. When I'm crumpled on the ground and baked in my own shame, baked in my own fear, baked in my own loss. I need a God that is willing to touch me and say, rise. Don't be afraid. I'm with you. I need a God that's going to go down from the mountain with me, that he's going to get the blood and the mass of my life to spit in the disappointment and all the things that are the fingerprints of this world that we don't like to talk about, but that we all carry.

And it's why you're here this morning. Because if I don't got this, what do I have? That's the God that goes into the valley. This is exactly what has happened. And now that you have Christ in you, the hope of the glory. When the pain comes, when the sickness comes, when you lose the loved one or you're financially unstable, or your friends have betrayed you, or you don't know where to turn left, or you don't know how to turn right, it's not about me tapping on God.

The gates of heaven for God to listen to me. In that moment, I still myself in prayer. And guess what? I can hear. This Lord and I read His word, and I come to church and you listen to these kind of things, and we come to the communion table and we sing worship songs, and we walk in community and we love each other.

And I find out what's going on with you. We live our lives together and we lock arms. And I tell the truth to you and quit hiding. And. And I hear it. And I hear it. And I begin to have this conversation with God, and my life becomes full. Because guess what? I'm going to walk out and one day I'm going to see.

And I know here I'm going to meet someone, and I'm going to hear them wrestling behind the walls of some self-imposed prison, and they're dying in their own sin or their own shame or their own, whatever it is. And now it's my turn. Knocking on the walls of their heart. Maybe I'm just offering a kind word. Maybe I'm a vitamin church.

Maybe I'm telling them a piece of my story. But the point is this I need to share that Jesus with them. And one day they'll knock back. And when they look up, you can say the words of Jesus, rise and have no fear. The same words that you've heard in verse eight. And when they lift their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And they were coming down the mountain. Jesus commanded them, tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. So guess what? The Son of Man is raised from the dead. Let's tell the vision. Let's proclaim the vision. Let's receive it as we walk with others who long for the same thing. We long for connection, and we knock on the walls of each other's hearts.

And the same way that the Lord is not on the walls of our own. Amen, Amen.