

The Rev. Billy Cerveney:

Good morning. How are we doing? Looking good. One of my favorite people and one of them in history and in modern history, for sure, was, Senator John McCain. Some of you, remember him? He passed away a number of years ago. He actually used to live in Jacksonville for a season.

And John McCain, before he was a US senator. Years ago, he was a fighter pilot in Vietnam, and his plane was shot down and he was taken to, a very, squalid prison in North Vietnam and Vietnam. Well, much of his time was spent in solitary confinement, and he was tortured. He had he had broken arms and broken legs from the crash and they had said had set them wrong.

He had endured all kinds of a lack of medical care and beatings and all those kind of things. And years later, when he was interviewed and someone said to him, what was the worst thing that you went through during that time? He said, worse than the beatings, worse than the lack of medical care. Worse than the food.

Worse than all of those things. It was the isolation. The hardest part was the lack of connection. Because you lose your reference point for reality, who you are and what you are. But when you're by yourself, you just tear free from your moorings in reality, and you begin to drift. And he said, one of the greatest things that you do as a prisoner is that you constantly try to connect with other prisoners.

You're passing notes or you're tapping on the walls, or you're doing different things. You just stay in touch. And to remember that you belong to the human race. And one day he was sitting in his cell in isolation, and he hears something moving on the other side of his wall in another cell, and he realizes there's a soldier there.

And if it's a soldier, it's got to be an American. So he reaches over to the to there, grabs a piece of rock, and he goes to the wall and he taps on the wall. If it were years ago, there was that that old, that rhythmic, phrase he would sing shaving a haircut, six bits or two bits, whatever it is.

And he would tap it on the wall, shave in a haircut, shave, waiting for someone to respond on the other side to bits. And he never heard anything. And this went on for days and days turned to weeks. And then finally, when he was getting ready to give up, McCain taps on the wall again. A haircut, and then he hears.

And this person began to respond to him. And over the days, he began to tap more. And they developed Morse code, and they began to communicate. And he realized that this was another American soldier who had been captured, who had been shot down. And years later, when that soldier was interviewed, what he said was, I was on the verge of dying.

I'd given up hope. I was broken, I was shattered, I was defeated, and I listened to those taps on the wall again and again and again. And it was those taps that eventually got me to reconnect. And they saved my life. I love that story because it resonates with something really deep in me, and I think in you as well.

If you listen to me, see, one of our greatest longings as human beings is for connection. Just to connect, to belong, to see and be seen. And the reason that is, is because we were made by God, and God is Father, son, and Holy Spirit. He is community in and of itself. He is relationship in and of itself.

It is foundational to what he is. And guess what? You were made in his image and as his image bearer, you were made for relationship. That's what God said in the creation story. It's not good for man to be alone when we are, and we end up like John McCain or someone like that, we begin to lose our reference point from reality.

And the truth is this you don't have to be in a jail cell to get to that place, because we isolate so often from others, we isolate ourselves emotionally or we like. Yeah. How are you doing? I'm fine. I'm fine. When really, we are a cauldron of feelings and things going on in and of ourselves. We also do this spiritually with God.

So often we feel that separation from God, whether that is something of our own doing or there is pain and brokenness and disconnect in our lives that we didn't choose. And when we are

praying to God, please respond. And we're tapping on the walls of heaven and it feels like God's silence. And we're saying, where are you? What do you do with that?

Hey, what do you do with that place? I love our passage. Today in Matthew 17, Jesus is with his disciples in Kesari of Philippi. This is a city. And we, we, we see it in chapter 16, in the previous chapter. It's a city that's far north of Jerusalem. It's nestled at the foot of this large mountain called Mount Hermon.

And this is a gentile region. And it would be hard to overstate how much this region was a hotbed for the occult. And spiritual activity and Second Temple writings with the Jewish, Pharisees and the Sadducees and the writers of that time. They wrote that it was there on Mount Hermon where when the angels, when Satan led the angels in rebellion against God, it was at Mount Hermon where they descended, and they made their agreement to rebel against God.

But it wasn't just the Jewish people that felt that way. Caesarea Philippi. It was originally a Greek city, and it was called Penelas, which was named after the Greek god Pan, which was the god that was the god of panic and chaos, where we get the word panic from. And they had carved a giant temple and the walls of Mount Hermon and the mouth of this giant cave.

And they believed that this cave, they thought that this cave was the gateway to the underworld, to Hades. So literally it was the gates of hell. So when Peter, when Jesus is talking to Peter in chapter 16 and Peter professes that Jesus, you are the Christ, after Jesus asks him who people say he is, and Jesus turns to Peter and he says, on this rock I will build my church.

And the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. He's standing in the shadow of this mouth of this cave.

So here we are. It's not a coincidence. It's where we're standing on. And in chapter 17, and all of a sudden, Jesus brings his inner circle up to this mountain. And it says, after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John and his brother. And they led them up on a high mountain by themselves. Now, I don't know.

I'm not Peter James, and John, but I'm guessing if you were there, you're looking left. You're looking right. Like, what are we doing here? And it was in that moment that Jesus begins to pull back the curtain, and he begins to unfurl and reveal his identity. And his mission is verse two. And he was transfigured before him, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

Some translations say it was wider, or some other passages in Scripture where this story is told that his clothes were whiter than any bleach could make them, and behold, there appeared with him Moses and Elijah talking with him. Now again, you're a disciple. You can understand you're a little blown away at this moment. There's your rabbi and he's glowing.

But all of a sudden there's Moses and there's Elijah. And here comes Peter, who is one of my favorite, because Peter's this ready fire, aim guy. And he just he just he does not have an internal dialog. He just starts talking. And Peter's like, this is awesome. This is amazing. We've this is what we have been waiting for.

Jesus. I tell you what I'm going to do. He didn't ask a question. He didn't sit around and wait. He goes, well, I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to build these three tents, one for you, one for Elijah, one for Moses. And all of a sudden the father interrupts him, this is my beloved son.

With whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. And in that moment all the disciples, the three disciples of the apostles, collapsed in fear. Now, a couple things I want you to point out here. I want you to see what's going on, because this is this is a wonderful story. You can't read this story and not get taste of what happened on Mount Sinai back in the book of Exodus, in Exodus 33, Moses goes up to commune with God on the mountain, and he wants to see God, and he wants to see his glory.

And he says, God, I just want to see you. But God is like nobody can look at me and live. So here's we're going to do Moses. I'm going to tough you, tuck you into this little cleft of the rock, and I want you to hide your face, and I want you to look down, and I'm going to pass my shadow by you.

And so he does that, and his shadow passes over it. And it is the shadow of God is so glorious. It says in chapter 34 that when Moses comes down, his face is glowing as he is reflecting God's glory. And in this moment it feels like this day Peter is look, but now it includes Elijah and Jesus, and he wants to build these three tents so he can freeze this moment.

But one of the things he's doing in that moment, by building those tents, like he'll put you all in a kind of a lump, you all together. What he's saying in that moment, he's putting Elijah and Moses and Jesus on the same level, you see, because there's a big difference here in Exodus 34 where Moses begins to glow.

He is reflecting God's glory that he's just beheld. He's like a mirror bouncing light off of him. But in this story in Matthew 17, Jesus is radiating God's glory. He's not reflecting it. It's an unveiling. Jesus in this moment, he is not momentarily becoming something else, that he is not in this moment. Jesus is revealing the fullness of who he is.

He's not changing into something just so he'll change back. He is pulling back the curtain saying, I need you to see what I really am. I'm Yahweh, I am Yahweh, I am the God whose glory Moses could not stand in the presence of. That's who I am. I'm the God who's glory you had to tuck away in the Holy of Holies, lest you be incinerated.

And here he is. And God says, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.

And in that moment they collapse in the presence of his glory. What God is saying in that moment is wonderful, is it is to see Elijah. And as wonderful as it is to see Moses, Jesus just isn't another prophet. He's not just some other priest in the list of priests. What God's doing is saying, this is my beloved son.

This is coronation language. Yahweh, the name that is too holy for humanity to even speak. They wouldn't even speak it. They wouldn't even write the name Yahweh. You know, when you read your Old Testament, you see, and the Lord, and it's got the Lord and all capital letters. That's not Lord, that's the word Yahweh. But the Hebrews wouldn't write it.

So they used a circumlocution. They use a replacement word. And we're right, Lord, there. That's how holy they treat it. This is Yahweh. He was declaring Jesus as Yahweh, as God, not equal to Elijah and Moses not equal to those gods that had been worshiped, not equal to Pan or any of the pantheon of Greek gods that were celebrated on this mountain.

God was saying that this is he is the greater heavenly. He is greater than any heavenly being who rebelled against God, greater than the principalities in the thrones of this world. Jesus owns the story because he's the one who's writing the story. And let me tell you the story Jesus is writing. It's a very different story than the one that everyone else had been reading.

One of the things I want you to see here and those ancient religions, you got to see the context in this because it makes these stories come to life. And those ancient religions, mountains were always places where gods dwelled. You see this in the Greeks. They had, Mount Olympus. Even for the Jews, it was where Moses went up to a mountain to meet with God.

The Canaanites had mount, and it was a place where. It's why. It's a place where gods dwell. That's why they would build pyramids. And there they have built ziggurats, these giant mountain looking structures. What these things were, they were they were these imitation mountains where they would go and worship. But the biggest difference is this. And those ancient religions, mountains were a place where the gods went to get away and escape humanity.

It's the where they went to. They could not deal with these pesky, needy humans that were just too loud. Literally. There are many ancient texts to talk about God's going to mountains because humans were too loud. They would go there incessant, incessant, and annoying needs. But in this story, Jesus who owns the story the mountain is not where God comes to escape humanity.

It's where he comes to meet them. It's a thin place. It's where heaven and earth overlaps. It's where God comes and invites humanity into his divine story. It's a place where he reveals himself. He invites them into the story, a story that we can't see on our own. A story that, like Jesus's identity, they are on the mountain.

It's a it's a story that had to be revealed by God in the Holy Spirit.

It's what does that have to do with us? What does that have to do with me? But because the God we serve, we realize he is not detached from our story. The author of creation, the one who spoke all things into being, the one who breathed life into humanity. He doesn't sit back and look at you and admire you like you're some book on a shelf that he's written.

It's not like our world is some clock that he wound up set on the counter, and he's just going to sit back and watch it until time runs down. No, not only does he is he not detached from the story, what we realize here is he has written himself into it. He has written himself into it. And if he has done that, what that means is this story is of eternal significance.

Your story. My story. He's not indifferent. It goes deeper. You see, when God begins to speak in Peter and James and John, they collapse and they're facing the glory that would have incinerated Moses, the glory that they spent their entire lives considering it as it was tucked away in the Holy of Holies, the glory whose name Yahweh could not be spoken.

They were crumpled in the presence of it on the ground, this incinerating glory. And do you know what this God of glory did in that moment? But Jesus came and touched them and said, rise, and have no fear. Do you see why that matters?

The God that has every right to build a palace for himself on the mountain, the God that has every right to detach himself and look the other way. He chose not to. He not only wrote himself into this story, he chose to leave this heavenly dwelling place not just to Lord over us and to appear in a fireball.

He did it so we could see in Matthew 17 the greatest glory expressed in Jesus on the mountain, to prepare him for the greatest suffering that he was going to experience in the valley, the one that he would experience alone. The suffering that when he went to Gethsemane, he and his apostles abandoned him, that he suffered alone. Then he went to his trial, and Peter didn't deny even knowing him.

He suffered the indignities alone, the beatings alone. And when he climbed on the cross, and he was nailed there because he chose to, he wasn't a victim. He suffered it alone. And in the most lonely moment recorded in human history, when he turns his eyes to heaven, quoting Psalm 22, he says, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He was alone, ultimately alone in death. Why?

So we would never have to face any of that alone. He was alone, so you never would have to be for us in this room. The Transfiguration. It was a foreshadowing of what would be after the resurrection, which is very true, the glorious, resurrected Jesus. But I need you to hear this, that glory that we see on the mountain at Pentecost.

God poured it out upon his people. He poured it on you. He poured it on me. He poured it in me. And now in Pentecost, because of Pentecost, it is in me. And it tells me that I am not alone. That is so good. Because let me tell you, and this is true of me, and I know it's true of you.

I don't need a God that just tolerates me. I don't I don't need a God that that sits on a mountain and gives me directions that I can occasionally get up there, have a conversation with them so I can go back to the valley and deal with my own life. I need a God who is willing to touch me when I am crumpled, face down on the ground in my own shame and my own failures, in my own rejection.

I need a God that's willing to come down the mountain, in the blood, in the mess, in the spit, in the torn relationships of my life. I need a God that is going to walk into the insecurities and grab me by the hand and tell me you're not alone. I need a God who bleeds, a God who lives, and a God who can't die again.

And that is exactly what has happened. See if you're if you can declare Christ as your Savior. What that means is this. You now have Christ in you, the hope of glory in you, and you are in him, and you'll never be alone. That means when the sickness comes, that means when you lose your spouse or you feel rejection or loss.

Those things that are just the thumbprints and the fingerprints of the valley, we still our hearts. And I can slow myself in prayer. And when I slow myself in prayer. Can you hear it?

God, he's tapping on the walls of my heart. And the more I read scripture, and the more I worship and the more I step into community, it gets louder and I can hear it and I become begin this conversation with God. And it begins to not only to redefine my perspective. I'm reconnecting. I begin to understand, and I begin to walk into the world.

Seeing a story that I've been invited into that is transforming. And then as I become more secure in that place, guess what? I begin to encounter other people whose heart is closed off and they were standing behind the wall, imprisoned in their own isolation. Guess what I get to do in that moment?

I can call them forward, and I can invite them forward. And I can tell them you're not alone, because I'm here and I'll be with you. And I can begin to share who this Jesus is and what he's done. And sometimes I do that in, in words. And eventually you always need to, but eventually I. But sometimes I just need to do it.

And the way I love them and love them well, here's what happens. You can say to them the words of Jesus, rise and have no fear. And when they lift their eyes, it says in verse eight, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded and tell them, no one the vision until the son of Man is raised from the dead, in the Son of Man is raised from the dead.

And now we can tell the vision, we can tap on the walls of people that are lost in the same way that the what the Lord tapped on the walls of our heart to invite us into the story, to say, rise. Don't be afraid because you're not alone. That's a savior that we need, not one that hides on a mountain, but one that walks with me through the valley.

Amen, Amen.

