

The Rev. Billy Cerveney:

So one of my favorite people, in modern, memory, was a U.S. senator, and his name was John McCain. You might remember him. You did a number a couple years ago. He lived in Jacksonville. Actually, at one point, some of you might even know his kids, but John McCain was a Navy pilot back in the day during Vietnam.

And he was this just, you know, he was he's a tough guy, tough as a \$2 steak. As I say, he was a tough guy. And John McCain was flying over North Vietnam and his plane was shot down and he was he was captured by the North Vietnamese. And he was taken to this prison there called the Hanoi Hilton.

And he had broken arms and broken legs, and they set his arms poorly, and he was beaten and tortured and put into solitary confinement. And years later, when they came to John McCain, they said, what was the worst part about your captivity at the Hanoi Hilton? And he said, by far worse than the beatings, worse than the malnutrition, worse than the lack of medical care.

The worst part was the isolation. The worst part was the way that I was alone. Because when you're isolated, when you live like that, you lose your reference points for reality. You forget who you are. You don't have someone to kind of play catch with emotionally, and you begin to it just, he says. It begins to get weird and you get disoriented and you don't know who you are.

And he tells the story that that in the Hanoi Hilton they would put you in these in these solitary confinement chambers and you would have no contact. And the big game was, how would you communicate with the people around you? And you do that by knocking on the walls. You do that by passing notes under the door. But anything to just remember that you're human, that you're connected with someone with something.

And one day John McCain's in his cell, and he's lying there and he hears the door of the cell next to him shut, which had previously been unoccupied, and he hears a man move against the wall, and he goes, and he picks up a rock, and he goes to the edge of his of his, cell to the wall, and he taps.

You remember the old thing like shaving a haircut? Six bits. And he knocked on the wall and he goes.

Waiting for the person to reply. But there was nothing. He does it again.

And there's nothing. And he does it again and again to no reply. And he does it the next day and the next day. And the day turns into weeks. And then one day he's about to give up. He goes to his wall and he says.

And I don't know where he is.

Someone replies, what we learned later is the John McCain. What John McCain couldn't see is that this gentleman was on the other side of the wall. Was wounded and broken and dejected that he had given up. And he kept trying and kept trying. And as he began to draw him out and tap on that wall, this man swam to the surface and he began to reconnect.

At first it was the taps. And then eventually he heard this and it made sense to him, and he went over to the wall and he replied. And years later, when that soldier was interviewed, he said, John McCain saved my life. He said I'd given up. My body was broken. I didn't think I could make it, and it was his persistence.

He kept tapping and he kept tapping and it finally, he saved my life. Isn't that amazing story? And the reason that such a good story, the reason I know that it resonates with me, it resonates with you, is because there's this aspect of our hearts that we were connected for. We were. We have this longing for connection. We were made for connection, to be seen, to be heard, to be known by another person, to be touched, to talk, to exchange ideas.

And that's not by accident, because God, father, Son and Holy Spirit, he is relationship in and of himself, and he created you in his image. Therefore you are made for relationship. You've heard

me say this a million times, but we read this in Genesis two. It says, it's not good for man to be alone. That's why God made us to.

We are to be in relationship. And when we are deprived that, like John McCain, we begin to lose our reference points for reality. We begin to tear free from our grasp on what matters and purpose, and we lose sight of ourselves. Let me tell you, as people in this room, I know you're not sitting in a jail cell, but we don't have to sit in a jail cell to isolate ourselves.

We can isolate ourselves emotionally. I can go away and I can be in talking to you all I want. And I could be in a relationship with you, but you don't know anything about me. I can go in and we can. We can have spend lots of time together, but you don't know what's really going on. And this is isolation that begins to eat away at us.

But we also can do this spiritually with God. We can isolate from with God. And so often I can feel that separation when those things are going wrong in my life or, you know, I'm buried in my shame or my fear is kicking my tail or something's not going right, or someone I know is sick, or we lose someone and I feel like when I'm in my prayers, I'm going up to God.

I'm going. And I get nothing. We have this passage that we read today that really pushes back on that and really speaks to the question of, where are you, God, when we're in that place? So Matthew 17, Jesus is intercessory. Philippi. We just talked about it, as we said, is this place that is steeped with all these spiritual implications.

And it says in verse one, after six days of being there, Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and he led them up on this high mountain by themselves. Now remember, this place is, is a hotbed for spiritual activity. And is there going up to the top, I don't know, I wasn't Peter, James or John, but I can imagine they're sitting there and they're looking at each other going, what are we doing here, man?

Think of all the places. Why are we here?

And they're there on top of this mountain that's just pregnant with spiritual implication. He brings his inner circle. And in that moment, he begins to peel back the curtain to allow them to see something they have never seen. Verse two, it says he was transfigured before them, and his face talking about Jesus had shown like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

In other places in the other Gospels, it says that his clothes was so white it was whiter than any bleach could make them. And behold, there appeared to him, to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. Now, if you were a disciple, can you imagine what that's like? Seriously? They're blown away. And here comes Peter. And I love Peter because Peter's such a ready, fire, aim guy.

He just starts running his mouth. He's like, Lord, it's just so good that we're here. He sees Moses and Elijah, and it's this glorious moment, what he wants to do in this moment. He wants to press pause. He wants to freeze it, and he wants to build three tents. And in the middle of Peter saying, God. And he given his agenda for what needs to happen next, the father interrupts.

We hear the voice of the father says, this is my beloved son.

With whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. And then the apostles collapse in fear before the glory of God. And there's a couple of things I want you to see in this passage that help see what's going on here. Do you can't read this story and not get a taste of what happened on Mount Sinai. That's that passage that Chelsea read a little bit ago from Exodus.

24, where Moses goes up and he communes with the Lord when he goes up again. And in Exodus chapter 33, and Moses goes up to the mountain to meet with God, and he wants to see God. And he said, God, I if I could just see you. And God says, Moses, you can't do that. You don't understand my glory.

It's too much. No man, no person can look upon God and live. But I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I want you to hide in this little cleft of the rock here. I want you to hide and tuck yourself in here. And when you're. When you're hiding in that rock, I'm going to come by and I'm going to let my shadow pass over you.

And so Moses goes, and he hides in the cleft of the rock, and the shadow passes over him. And in Exodus 34 it says that Moses came down from the mountain, and he was glowing because he was reflecting the glory of God that had passed over him in that powerful. So it feels like that that scene where Peter is looking at Elijah and Jesus, and he says, I want to freeze this moment.

I want to I want to put the three tents here because Moses and Elijah and Jesus, he's but what he's doing in that moment when he puts Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together, he's kind of putting them in the same category. Here are these three great men. You see, the difference is this in Exodus 34, Moses is reflecting God's glory in in Matthew chapter 17, Jesus is radiating it.

He is the source of the glory. He is not a reflection of some glory beyond him. What's happening in this moment is this is an unveiling. It's a revelation. Jesus is not becoming something else momentarily. And then stepping back to become something that he normally is. Jesus is not revealing, something briefly to change forms again later. What he's doing is he's peeling back the curtain and he's showing them what he truly is.

Jesus is showing the fullness that he is Yahweh, the glory that Moses couldn't stand in the presence of. He said, that's me. That's what I am. And then God says, and he comes, and he speaks out to them. He says, this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. And they collapse. And the presence of the father's voice and what God is saying in that moment, what the father is saying in that moment, he's saying, as wonderful as Elijah and Moses are, Jesus isn't just another prophet.

Jesus isn't just another priest. This was coronation language. This was Yahweh declaring Jesus to be Yahweh, to be God. He was saying that he's not equal to Moses and Elijah. He's not equal to all these other gods that have been worshiped and glorified on this mountain. He's not like these angels that declared their independence from God on this mountain that went and went to war with all that was good.

He is. He is bigger. He is greater than anything than that. He is higher than the principalities. He is higher than the thrones of this world. The story that you've been invited into, what he's saying is Jesus owns the story. He's the writer of this story, but it's a very different story than they've ever heard before, let me tell you.

Because when you when you see them standing on the mountain, this is not lost on them. You see an ancient cultures and ancient religions. One thing you'll always see is that mountains are always this place where the gods dwelled. So if you look at the Greeks, they would have Mount Olympus. That's where Zeus would live. Or you had the Canaanites, they had Mount Zafran, where all their, their gods would, would dwell, or even in the to the Jewish people, they went to Mount Sinai.

And that is where they, Moses met with God. They would build these temples called ziggurats, which were these giant pyramids, mountain looking things that had staircases going up to the top where they could meet God or worship him. And the reason that the gods in those ancient religions, the reason those gods lived on those mountains, is they wanted to separate themselves from humanity.

They went up there because they didn't want to deal with the pesky needy humans. Their annoying demands, their lack of power, and their lack of glory. But in this scripture, when we see that Jesus is the one that owns the story, what we realize is this story is different than any story that's ever been told. Because when God it was descends to the mountain, he's not doing it to escape with human beings.

When God descends to the mountain, he's not doing it to escape human beings. He's doing it to invite them in. He's doing it so he can embrace them. He's doing it so he can. He can call them his own. And in this story, we can see that just like Jesus's identity had to be revealed by their own, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the story that we're being invited into has to be revealed as well.

So that's awesome. But what does that matter to you? What does that matter to me? Like why? Why does all that? How does that relevant to what I'm doing here in 2026? Because we have a God that we serve that's not detached from our story. We have a God, the author of creation who spoke all things into existence, that breathed life into the first man and called him his own and set him into motion.

He's not like some author that's written a book and is sitting it on the shelf for himself to admire. He's not like a guy that's just wound up a clock, and now he's setting it on the bench, and it's just going to go to wind down its own power until it's done. No, it's different than that because the author of this story, Jesus, he's written himself into it.

He's the main character. He's not outside on some astral plane. He has written himself into the story. And if he has written himself into this story, that means this story, that your story, the story which we are a part of, is of eternal significance. It matters. There are no details that are insignificant to him. He holds the story, he's writing the story, and it is of eternal significance.

He is not indifferent to you. Oh, it gets better. It gets even deeper. So when the father speaks, Peter and James and John, they collapse in fear. They collapse in fear because they're facing that glory that would have incinerated Moses. They are there, that glory that had to be tucked away in the Holy of Holies, that no one could, could come near Yahweh, God, God's name, the holy name of God, that is so holy that the Jewish people weren't allowed to say the name Yahweh.

You know, when you read in the Old Testament and you're reading along and you're something, some, some, and then you come across the word Lord and it's in all caps. That's not the word Lord, it's the word Yahweh. But it was a name so holy they wouldn't even write it. They say early Jewish scribes would write the name Yahweh, and then they would throw their pen away.

So it's that glory, the glory cloud of God. They are crumpled on the ground before God's incinerating glory. And you know what happens next? Verse seven. But Jesus came and he touched them, and he said, rise, and have no fear. You see what that matters? It's why this matters. Jesus, He could have built a palace on a mountain.

He could have stayed in his throne in heaven and not have to deal with all this mess. He didn't have to write himself into the story, but he did. And look at the way he wrote himself into the story he chose. He chooses to leave his heaven, heavenly dwelling place to come down to the mountain, not to flex and to appear before us is some in some is some fireball.

No, we see it. Here is the greatest glory we see expressed in Jesus in the Gospels. We see in this moment. And the reason that he did that is that he was about to prepare himself for the greatest suffering that he was going to experience in the Valley. And he goes down and experiences it, and he steps into the Garden of Gethsemane.

He and his friends fall asleep and they leave him. And Jesus is alone. And then next you see Jesus go to his trial, and his favorite disciples deny him, and they scatter. And Peter says, I don't even know him. He's alone. And he carries his cross to Golgotha on his back. And he's alone, and he's nailed to the cross, and he's alone and he's abandoned.

And he hangs on that cross, hanging on that cross in the loneliest thing that has ever been written in all of the history of the world. Jesus quotes Psalm 22, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The Father himself turns away, and he's alone, and he goes into the tomb alone. He experiences death alone. Why did he do that?

Why was he alone? So you would never have to be so. You would never have to be. That was the point that he would be with you. See, for us in this room, we read the story of the Transfiguration is this beautiful picture of what Jesus is going to be like in glory. It's what's waiting for us.

But that's not all it is. Because that glory that we're seeing, that Spirit of God that you see reflected in Matthew 17, after Jesus's resurrection, after his ascension, and he sits on the throne to the right hand of the father, what does he do? He pours His Holy Spirit out upon his people. That glory, the Spirit of Jesus, that that thing that you saw, you see on Him in Matthew 17.

It's now in me. It's now in you. It now is what defines you. You have become the temple of God. You have become the holiest of holies. Well, you were this holy space. And he goes with you into the valley, and you never have to be alone when you've lost someone, or your body's not doing what you're supposed to be doing, and you're breaking down and you're scared your finances are working or your life's not unfolding.

And that's such good news to me. That's such a salvation. Because I'll tell you what, I don't need a God that just tolerates me. I don't need a God that just sits up in me like, I'll deal with him.

I don't need a God that sits on top of a mountain that I can access. Occasionally, when I remember the directions that I can ask for advice that I know so I can go back down in the valley and just live my life that is worthless to me. I need a God who has skin in the game. I need a God that is of grace, who's willing to touch me when I am crumpled in a pile beneath my own shame, beneath my own fear.

But he's my own failures. Beneath the ways that I screw it up. And I do it all the time. A God that's willing to touch me and say, stand up, come here. Don't be afraid. The God I need is the God that will come down the mountain, and they will walk with me in the bloody mess, the spit and the disappointment and the failures in the half truths that I live in, that I will never be alone.

That's our Savior. And that's exactly what's happened to us. And now you have Christ in you, the hope of glory. And what that means is this is when you're going through something hard and pain is screaming in your ear, sickness is screaming in your ear, or loneliness is screaming in your ear. You don't know which way to turn.

And you're and you just can't hear it. And you begin to slow your heart. You begin to slow your heart. And in prayer you go to the Lord and you have this moment. And guess what you hear there?

It's the Holy Spirit. He's knocking, he's calling you. And then we listen and we come closer, and we come to church, and we and we sing worship songs and we risk being bold and we sing and all of a sudden we hear it louder and we bring our Bibles, and we pour ourselves into it, and we read our Bibles, maybe outside a church, God forbid.

And we begin to ingest the Word of God, and we begin to step into community, and we begin to learn people with that voice in that knocking gets louder and it turns to words and it comes and

it turns to a presence, and we experience it in community. And all of a sudden my life is transformed. I come to the communion table, all of those things, and my life is transformed.

And then one day you're going to go out and you're going to encounter someone, and you're going to meet them, and you're going to realize that person's locked in their own prison cell, either their own shame and their own pain, their own weakness, whatever it is. And you. But you know, you know what's going on and you step into their life and you do this.

And they don't answer, and you come back again.

And you do it again and again. And one day, by the grace, the Holy Spirit, maybe, just maybe, you'll hear.

That reply and that person will step out. And when they do, you can say to them the words of Jesus, rise. Have no fear.

Verse eight. And they lifted their eyes, and they saw no one but Jesus. Only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. Well, guess what? The son of Man is raised from the dead. We get to tell him the vision. We get to tell him this isn't the end of the story, because I know the one who's writing it.

I know the one who's hold your story because in the middle of your story. And he could be in the middle of your story and let me, let me tell you about him, because let me tell you about me. Let me share with you what's going on in my life. Let me show you where I've been, because you don't know the places I've been.

And you begin to tell the story about a God who doesn't wait for us on the mountain. A God that comes and is part of us and descends into the valley. And who loves this thing? Is this meaning and purpose. And it might not be pain free, but it's good and it's transformative, and it's a salvation, and it's what we need.

Amen, Amen.