

Lift Up Your Hearts, Pt. 2
Revelation and Response
Exodus 3: 1-8; I Kings 18: 20-24

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**February 21, AD 2016
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Some people are beach people. There's no better vacation for them than heading where they can hear the sea rolling in day and night. The expanse of the ocean and the rippling of the waves on the shore immediately relaxes them. Beach people can point to a study which showed that a week at the beach proved to relieve more stress and create greater tranquility than any other destination. Clearly those who responded to the survey did not have my experience of taking four kids to the beach. Four bodies had to be frequently lathered in sunscreen. Each child had to be watched the whole time. And at the end each, under protest, had to be hosed off so the scratchy sand wouldn't make them any crazier. By contrast, some folks are mountain people. They prefer the cool air of the elevation to the heat of the sand. Views of mighty peaks give them a sense of God's grandeur in a way that just makes them peaceful. Of course the mountain people seldom report on the breathless joy of carrying a screaming child with a 30 pound wet diaper up a steep slope. Nor do they consider the marvelous diversity of insects, serpents and rodents which attempt to gain entry through mountain windows. Beach or mountain, neither preference is more godly than the other.

So it's no slight to the sun and ocean seekers that this week we've been focusing on mountains of God in the Old Testament. Next week we'll be considering seven mountains that were important in the life of Jesus. In three weeks we'll be looking at the importance of mountains in the prophecies of the renewed heavens and earth that God will create. And all through these days, we'll keep thinking together about how we are, each and all, spiritual hikers, coming up to meet the LORD who has called us to himself. This morning I'd like to concentrate on just two of these important mountains.

In our passage from Exodus 3, Moses was tending a flock of sheep for his father-in-law. He came near Mount Horeb, which Scripture calls the mountain of God. For there the LORD appeared to Moses through a bush which burned in flames but never burned up. Moses was fascinated at the sight. How could something burn without being destroyed? A fire has to have a source. That's why we put logs on a fire, so they will burn. As they are consumed, we get flames. But

this bush was not getting burned up. So what was the source of the flame if not the wood of the bush?

We might think here of the way gas logs work. The flame burns but the logs themselves don't burn. There's another source. The seemingly endless supply of natural gas through the pipes gives the fuel for the flame. Just so, the Spirit of God burned through the bush. God himself was the source of the flame. He himself is the endless source of all flames, all light, and all power.

From this event of revelation, we learn at least four key things about our God.

- 1) The LORD makes himself known as the source of everything. He is not part of the creation; he is the Creator of creation. He is not mastered by his creation; he is master over all creation. Our God is huge. Indescribable, uncontainable.

- 2) But this almighty Creator knows us personally by name. He calls through the burning bush: "Moses, Moses." While he is Lord of all, he has a plan for each and every individual. He takes personal interest in us.

- 3) God is personal and intimate, but he is not safe. He is holy. He is not our chum. Just in case Moses' curiosity got the better of him, God warned him not to approach the burning bush. He commanded Moses to take off his shoes. Such would be a sign of respect. Don't bring your dirt into this clean house. Take off your shoes. Recognize that you are vulnerable before the Holy One by making your feet vulnerable to the ground. This is not business as usual. This is not come as you are and act however you want. This is an awe inspiring moment that shakes you to your bones.

When he heard this, Moses hid his face from looking at the bush that burned without being consumed. Because when he realized he was looking at an appearance of the holy, Creator God, he was terrified. The sun gives us light and warmth; the sun makes the plants grow and is vital to all life on earth. But you can't look directly at the sun without burning up your eyes. It's too powerful. So too, God is too holy for mere humans to approach directly.

- 4) And yet, this personal but holy God, this mighty Creator who yet knows us by name is tenderly concerned for our well-being. He tells Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them." God sees. He sees our suffering in our circumstances. He sees our suffering in our hearts. He hears the cries we let out, and he hears the cries we keep tucked in our souls that no

human being ever hears. He knows our lives. That means he is intimately connected to what is going on with us, and indeed, to what is going on in this whole world he made. And he not only feels our suffering. He tells Moses that he has come down to deliver his people. He comes to save us. He comes to redeem us.

The parallels with the Christmas story are just wonderful. Moses was keeping watch over flocks of sheep when the LORD appeared to him. Moses encountered the glory and the holiness of God, and he was terrified. But the LORD assured him of his compassion. He promised that he would act as a savior for his people. So recall the passage we love so much from Luke 2. “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Suddenly an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And they were sore afraid. But the angel said, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people. For unto you is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” To shepherds keeping their sheep came a revelation of the glory of God. They saw a sight that shook them with awe. The reality of God crashed in on them just as it did on Moses. But then a word of assurance came. Fear not. I bring you good tidings of great joy. Implied in that message is the fact that God’s people yearned for good news. They needed glad tidings in a dark age. And God saw them. God heard them. God sent a deliverer. He sent the savior. Jesus, whose very name means “The LORD saves.”

The mountain of God is the place where God reveals himself. He makes himself known as the almighty Creator who yet has a personal interest in each one of his creatures. He is utterly holy, yet infinitely compassionate. Our sin offends him, yet his mercy compels him to send a savior to sinners that we might be led back to life and peace. He overcomes the gap between us and him.

The mountain of God is also the place where the LORD requires a response from us. His revelation creates choices of the utmost importance. He did not make himself known to Moses just for interesting theological information. God called Moses to be the messenger to his people about the coming deliverance. And he called Moses to be the leader in taking his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. When God makes himself known, he always calls us to respond.

We can see this clearly in the second mountain we are looking at today. Fast forward about four centuries. God’s people had entered the Promised Land. They were ruled over by a king, a man anointed to be God’s shepherd over his chosen

people. The king was responsible to lead the nation in faithfulness. But King Ahab had lost his head when he married the beautiful Jezebel. She was a worshipper of the Canaanite god Baal. The religion of Baal demanded rituals of degrading sensuality. Baal worshippers were called to make sacrifices that even included delivering their own infants to be burned. It was a brutal, dehumanizing religion. But it claimed to work. The sensuous rituals brought momentary ecstasy. And the religion claimed that Baal made the crops grow and the cattle reproduce. The most sophisticated people took up Baal and left the LORD behind as restrictive, boring, demanding and unreliable. King Ahab led the people away from the true God.

But God had not forsaken his people who had forsaken him by tumbling into idolatry. He sent them the prophet Elijah to call them back to devotion and obedience to the God who had made them and saved them. Elijah's ministry reached a climax on the top of a mountain. He gathered the people to a summit jutting out over the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. On Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a contest between their gods. But first, he challenged the LORD's people. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, then follow him." He set the contrast starkly before the people. You are trying have it both ways. You want the protection of the LORD I Am, but also the favor of Baal the fertility God. You want the blessing of the peace the law of the LORD brings, but also the sensual ecstasy of Baal. You can't have it both ways. So make a choice about which one is really the true God and give your life to him.

It's really important to see what Elijah was doing. He forced the people to think about where their choices would lead. He forced them to think about ultimates. He demanded that they think long term about what is true and real. Baal promised immediate gains. Make this sacrifice so the rain will come. Enact this ritual so the crops will grow. Don't think about what this is doing to you long term. This is just for now. Appease Baal so you can prosper today.

That's always the case with idols. Idols are anything we substitute for the true God. They are anything to which we give the devotion that should be reserved for God alone. Idols are where we put our heart's affection if it's not set on the true God. The deception that idols create is to get us to look just in the short term. Do this now to be ok, even though you suspect it might be wrong, because for the moment things will be better. Let's just take some obvious examples.

No one starts overusing pain pills with the thought, "I'd like to be a prescription drug addict. I'd like to be dependent on never really being fully

present in the world. I'd like always to feel like I'm floating so that I will no longer be able to deal with reality in my right mind." Of course not. We just think, "One more won't do any harm. I'll feel better this afternoon and that will be the end of it."

No one ever starts an affair thinking "I'd like to blow up marriage. I'd really like to put a dagger in my kids' hearts. I'd like to ruin my finances with a divorce and throw my reputation to the wind." Of course not. Idols aren't stupid. All an idol has to do is get me to say, "It's just a conversation. One more talk. She makes me feel admired and respected. Not like the criticizing woman at home. Just one more lunch and then I'm done."

It can be as simple as the daily choices we make. Of course I don't want to idolize being respected as the source of my identity. But I do need to get this guy back today so I don't lose face. I just need to even the score and then I'll be fine. And so it goes until life is ensnared by the quest to get even and exact revenge. Of course I don't want to idolize news and entertainment over knowing God. But just this morning I want to read about the basketball game and not Scripture. Just let me wake up a bit today and I'll get back with God tomorrow. And tomorrow becomes a year which becomes a decade of being a diminished Christian.

On the mountain of choice, Elijah put it to them. Look, if Baal is god, then follow him.

- If your stock portfolio can really give you peace that passes understanding, then keep devoting all your sense of well-being to what the market is doing.
- If there is really freedom in the bottom of every bottle, then take the next drink and get closer to that freedom.
- If there is affirmation that erases shame in manipulating people to believe that you are the fake self you present, then keep pretending with all your might.
- If perfectionism can really make you perfect, then by all means keep on working your list.
- If true intimacy is found in a succession of partners, no matter what relational havoc you create, then keep surfing for partners. Go for it.

If Baal in any of his forms is the true source of human flourishing, then give yourself to him. But be warned, in the end, when you have made your choice, you will be left only with Baal. You can gamble that you are right, but the Word of God warns us: choosing idols means we will be left only with what idols

ultimately deliver: the anxiety, the enslavement, the shame and the loneliness that is all those gods really trade for our obedience. But it's your choice.

But if the LORD I Am is God, then stop fooling around with dead things. Stop courting disaster. Stop playing games with spirituality. Stop inviting destruction. Stop being a flirt with the enemies of God.

- If there is true peace in no one else.
- If there is true atonement for sin only in the cross of Christ.
- If there is cleansing for every stain only in the blood of Jesus.
- If there is wholeness only in forgiving others by his grace.
- If the power of sex can only be life creating instead of destructive under Scripture's guidelines.
- If there is security only in the faithfulness of Christ toward us.
- If there is hope only in the eternal life he gives.
- If there is joy only in the one who rose from the dead.
- If only the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ is true.

Then what are you doing still playing around with dead things? Seize life by giving yourself utterly to the Lord Jesus Christ!

The people said not a word to Elijah's challenge. The silence was deafening. They knew they had been trying to have it both ways. They knew they weren't really sure which was the better path to life. But on the mountain where God demanded a response, he also revealed himself in power. He showed them anew that he is God, the God who alone can save. Just so, we need to hear the stories of those who have found freedom in renouncing Baal and returning to Jesus Christ. We need to hear from those who have gone home to repair marriages. We need to hear how the mystery of the cross of Christ created freedom from guilt. We need to hear how Christ gave us peace and hope even at graveside. We need to hear how forgiveness created reconciliation in hopeless situations. We need to hear that recovery from addiction is possible in Christ. We need to hear how love creates new life. The stories are all around us.

That's why we come to the mountain that is this sanctuary week by week. We hear the news: The LORD is Creator. And the LORD is Redeemer. He hears our cries and he has sent us a savior. And even as he saves us, he summons us to join him in his great mission of renewing the earth with his gospel. Every Bible study, every worship service is a mountain of God that brings us both revelation and the call for response. The LORD is God. Let's put ourselves in the hands of the one who cares for us. Let us follow him alone.