

The View From The Ridge
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Matthew 4:1, 8-11
Trey Davis
Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
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For the past several weeks, I've asked you to climb some biblical mountains with me. We floated with Noah to the top of Ararat where I suggested that the mountains are a place of great refuge and solace. Then we hiked with Abraham to the top of Moriah, with David and Jesus on the Mount of Olives, three men who wept as they ascended; I suggested that mountains might provide refuge but they also offer us tremendous challenge. We spent two weeks with Moses and the Israelites on the slopes of Sinai, where I focused on the idea of a mountaintop symbolizing the steadfast commitment and the life-altering change of covenant. And we followed Jesus to the tops of unnamed mountains where he taught, where he was transformed, and where he sent out his disciples to share his teachings and his love.

If it has felt like a long journey to you, then I have good news: today is the final summit. Today we're climbing the mountainous metaphor that I find the most interesting, the most convicting, the most compelling.

It is a lesson that comes from arguably the most important figure of the Old Testament in Moses and inarguably the most important figure of the New Testament in Jesus.

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As he approaches the end of his life, Moses is led to the top of Mount Nebo. This is extremely fitting, because so many important moments in Moses' life have taken place among the mountains. It was on a mountain that he encountered God in the form of the burning bush, on a mountain that he received the Ten Commandments, and on a mountain where he communes with God so much that his face begins to glow. Moses spends so much time climbing peaks that Zora Neale Hurston titled her novel inspired by the Old Testament hero *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

The difference between all of those other Moses-on-a-mountain moments and this one is that they were triumphant and this one is not. In those other stories, Moses bargained and begged with God, often successfully. In this one, he is resigned to a fate of never entering the Promised Land even though he can see it. In those stories, Moses is active, speaking despite his stutter; in this one, he is passive, completely silent.

It is a scripture that doesn't seem fair. Moses has done all of this work with the whiniest bunch of Israelites one could imagine...and for one mistake, he is barred from finishing the job and celebrating the achievement. Even worse, God takes him up on this mountain to look out over the Promised Land, which is supposed to be a sort of compromise, a lesser reward of some kind...but to me it feels like taking a kid to the mall on Christmas Eve and saying, "You're not going to get any of these toys, but you can look at them!"

There must be a really good reason for God to want Moses to see Canaan, even if he will never enter in. There must be a really good reason for Moses to be atop this mountain.

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Like Moses, Jesus spends a fair amount of time on mountains. He often goes there to pray, drawing closer to God and finding rejuvenation and resolve in the solitude of the mountains. He goes there to teach, using the mountains and their elevation to reach large crowds with sermons and with miracles.

The story in today's scripture includes none of this. Jesus is not on a mountain drawing closer to God but instead is being tempted by Satan. And Jesus does not teach a lesson or perform a miracle—he does not do anything, actually, but simply speaks one line of rebuttal. Like Moses on Nebo, this mountain experience is out of kilter for Jesus. Like Moses, there must be a really good reason why Jesus is with Satan atop this mountain.

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In 2018, Jennifer and I traveled to southern California for a wedding. We had a little extra time, so we crossed something off of our bucket list and took the ferry to Catalina Island. I'd read about this place before but had never been there; it sounded something of a fantasy world. When we arrived, we explored the little town near the harbor, and then we began to climb the Garden to Sky Trail, a 3-mile path that basically goes straight up until reaching a summit.

When we got to the top, we could look to our left and see the town of Avalon where we'd started our hike. Beyond it, for miles and miles, stretched the section of the Pacific Ocean between Catalina and Los Angeles. Without taking a single step, we could turn to the right and see more of the Pacific Ocean stretching out to the west. We were on a speck of land, on a ridge that climbed high above the sea and then gave us a view of as much ocean as anyone could ever hope to see at once. Seeing the world like that—taking in as much as anyone could see at one time from one spot—was simultaneously awe-inspiring and remarkably chastening. It made me feel big and little at the same time.

It'll make you think, to look at the world like that, to see it all from a mountaintop, spinning 360 degrees and never once having the horizon blocked by hill or tree or building. The splendor and the humility will give you some perspective.

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Moses and Jesus both seem appropriately humble in these texts. Moses (who may have consistently erred on the side of humility throughout the Israelites' story) still does not display any of the fire that caused him to kill a man in Egypt or pulverize a rock at Meribah. Jesus, the one man on Earth who probably doesn't need to be humble but is anyway, sidesteps the arrogance that the devil thinks will trip him up. I have to think that, looking out from their respective peaks, these two men see the world in a way that many people never do, that they grasp things that typically elude our senses, that they, too, have been given the gift of perspective. I suspect this is why God wanted Moses there in the first place, and I suspect it is why the devil's plot to tempt Jesus was destined to fail.

Moses and Jesus are not on their respective mountaintops to do anything. They are there simply to see, to comprehend, to absorb with mind and heart and gut and soul. What, then, do they see?

They see the world. Moses gazes upon the Promised Land, the settlements and pastures and rivers that have been designated for God's people, a land to which God has led this ragtag crew through a desolate wilderness. Jesus sees "all the kingdoms of the earth," even more towns and landscapes and people than Moses saw. They look until their eyes cannot take in anymore, until not only their eyes but also their hearts and minds are full.

Remarkably, they also see themselves. They seem to understand how they fit into that world that stretches out beyond them, the world that disappears under the falling sky. The mountain provides a view that allows them remarkable clarity and introspection, and it can do the same for us. When we go to the mountain and take in the view, we ought to comprehend ourselves. We ought to lay sight on our own souls.

Finally, if it were any other two characters, I would be afraid to make this argument, but I think they even see God.

In short, they see it all. Their vision—their perspective—stretches as far as the eye can see, until the sky meets the earth in a blurry horizon.

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I mentioned, back at the beginning of this sermon series, that I love that our church is on a ridge. A ridge is a particularly special kind of mountain. It is a narrow peak that lets you see down both sides at once. It is a place that offers a unique perspective.

When Jesus and Moses see it all, they even see how the different pieces fit together—how creation, humanity, God, and self can coexist in a way that makes sense and bears fruit. They comprehend that God hovers over the kingdoms they espy, that those kingdoms are full of people who speak different languages and adhere to different governments and even go to war with each other...and yet God loves the people of those kingdoms in all of their differences, and in God—in Christ—those different kingdoms come together. Moses and Jesus understand, from their mountaintops, that through God they also play a role in bringing those different people together.

As we have examined the mountains of the Bible—as we have delved into the comfort, challenge, covenant, commitment, change, and communion that these mountains offer—I have argued consistently that the church must also be a place that accentuates each of these aspects of life and faith. The church is a mountain, a place to go to explore and sharpen our faiths and to draw closer to God in the same way that these biblical characters found God through comfort, challenge, and covenant.

If that is true, then the kind of mountain the church should be is a ridge. It should be a place that offers humbling perspective because it offers a view of all sides.

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When I was a youth minister, I took my high schoolers on two different mission trips. One was to New York, where we volunteered in soup kitchens and homeless shelters. One was to rural Alabama, where we repaired houses damaged in storms in one of the poorest suburbs of Birmingham. They were extremely different trips. I wanted my youth to know that serving other people takes on a lot of different forms, that it occurs in a lot of different places, and that it requires us to give in a lot of different ways.

The trips were different not only because of the work projects but also because of our hosts. In New York, we worked and worshiped with a church two blocks from Times Square. The congregation included professors, actors, and those who lived on the streets. One Sunday, during Pride Week, the worship service included a drag queen soloist. Worshiping at this church stretched our youth, stretched our chaperones...it stretched our youth minister.

In Alabama, the mission site is run by a man named Monte who quit his job and moved his family to a trailer to start repairing houses after Hurricane Katrina. The congregation that hosts Monte and his family is what you might expect to find for a rural Alabama church. One year that we worked with them, the church was conducting a weeklong revival that included speaking in tongues (although I confess we weren't present that night). Still, worshiping with Monte and with that congregation also stretched our youth, our chaperones, and our youth minister.

I cajoled all of our youth to go on both of these trips at least once. The experience of the one informs the experience of the other. It was critical for them to look out over both sides of the ridge.

I cannot stress enough how highly I think of the people in New York and in Alabama. They are very, very different from each other and from me...but they are dedicated to their faiths in rich and meaningful ways. Being around them—all of them—makes me a better person and a better Christian. I like to think that this was true for all in our group who went to serve. I like to think that it gave us all perspective.

I am not the same person as my friends in Alabama or in New York City. We hold different beliefs, approach our faiths from different entry points, accentuate different priorities when we come to God. This is not surprising—no two people have identical faiths. When we look out from a mountaintop, the differences are not threatening but instead simply allow us to view how others approach life, to grow and to gain perspective.

I didn't join these two churches; I just attended them. There is room to listen, to respect, even to learn without joining...but we live in a world where people are afraid to listen to the other side, fearful that listening will mean that we are telling others we have aligned ourselves with the wrong group. We are afraid to appear sympathetic to specific sides when it comes to government, to social philosophy, to politics, to health, to childrearing, to theology. We are afraid even to be respectful because we do not want to be labeled, because we do not want to cast our lots with groups who are different, because we do not want people to think that "we're one of them."

As Christians, we are called to unity...not uniformity. From their summits, Moses and Jesus embody unity in faith, a unity that listens and respects the other because it knows that there is a greater good, a greater love that holds it all together. A unity that benefits from a wonderfully humbling, awe-inspiring perspective.

Our God is an enormous God, capable of knowing us better than we know ourselves, the holder of truths that continue to escape our minds, a source of love that is purer and deeper and more powerful than any love we can muster. Our God covers our whole earth and beyond. Our God does not need a mountain to perceive, to understand, even to embrace both sides of the ridge. I alluded to this last week, but these words from the book of Galatians bear repeating: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith..."²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

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Jesus' temptation takes place at the beginning of his ministry, when he is just starting out, when he is a relatively young man. Moses' experience at the apex of Nebo takes place in the final stage of his life—it is literally the last thing we know about him before he dies. Looking out from those peaks give both of them remarkable perspective. Reading these two passages next to each other suggests that there is no time in our lives, from start to finish, when we would not benefit from a little enhanced perspective. Looking out as far as we can, taking in all that we can possibly see, making room for the world in our church, in our lives, in our souls...that kind of perspective is a lifelong deal.

I have told you that I am proud that our church is on a ridge because of all of these mountain metaphors, but what I hope for this place is that it will be not only a mountain but also a ridgeline, a place that examines what exists on all sides, that rises above the parts of our world that sit low, and that then draws them together. That is who I think we are. That is who I think we must be in this world.

In 2015, as I returned to school, the classroom conversation one day turned to understanding why people on different sides spewed such vitriol at each other. Not surprisingly, no one had a good answer. To an older classmate of mine—one who had lived through the 1960s' anger and turbulence surrounding race and war—I asked if this was cyclical, if we'd actually been here before and just forgotten. He said something like, "I've lived a lot of history and studied even more of it, and I don't think it's ever been like this in our country." Again, that was 2015...six years ago. The gap has only gotten wider.

We—individually, as separate congregations, and as the corpus of Christ—we the Church have to look out over both sides of the ridge, to take them all in, to allow them to humble us, and to recognize that we sit upon the place where those sides meet. We are the place that can offer a unifying perspective.