

DIVINE INVITATION

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In the spring of this year I was invited to preach a revival at Salem United Methodist Church. It's located not too far from my home on Joplin Road. In preparation for the revival I met with the pastor at the church. After discussing the upcoming services and praying together for the revival, the pastor left, but I decided to linger for a few moments. Standing in the front yard with the church building on the right and the Peaks of Otter in the distance on the left, I prayed, "Lord, what do you want me to share with this congregation?" Almost immediately these words came to mind, "Meet Me on the Mountain." I couldn't help but feel that this was a message from the Lord, the same kind of message that He had given to Moses so long ago. The Lord had said to him, "Bring the people to this mountain so that they might worship me." This became the theme for the revival at Salem United Methodist Church. It is also the theme that the Lord has laid upon my heart for the upcoming series of sermons that I will be sharing with you over the next ten weeks.

So let's get started by reviewing a little bit about Moses and how he came to encounter the Lord's presence while he was taking care of his father-in-law's sheep. Most of us know the story. Moses was born to parents who were slaves. They were living in Egypt, and the king of that land decreed that all the male children were to be killed, for he was fearful that these Hebrew slaves were becoming too numerous. So Moses' mother put her son in a basket and placed it in the Nile River, hoping and praying that someone would rescue the baby before he was killed. Sure enough Pharaoh's daughter who was bathing in the river saw the basket, found the baby, and adopted him as her son. But she didn't know what to name him since most royal children had names associated with a god, such as Rameses which means "child of Ra." So she simply named him "child" or "Moses," and since in the Hebrew language his name meant "to draw out" and she had literally drawn him out of the water, well that's what she ended up calling him. Little did she realize how prophetic that name would become since he was the one whom God would later choose to "draw" His people out of Egypt.

Moses grew up as a prince of Egypt but he always knew that he was a Hebrew. His people were the Israelites, and that got him into trouble. As an adult he saw an Egyptian beating one of his countrymen, and looking around to make sure no one would see him, he took matters into his own hands and killed the man. Although he tried to keep what he had done a secret, burying the body in the sand, word got out. He had to flee for his life. Pharaoh sought to kill him. So he fled into the desert and that's where he found a new life as a shepherd. He married the daughter of a man named Jethro, and started taking care of his father-in-law's sheep. One day he took the flock to the back side of a place known as the

mountain of God, and that's where he met the Lord as recorded in Exodus 3:1-12. Let's look at the verses once more, especially verse 12.

Here's what they tell us. Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, also known as Reuel. As a priest of Midian I suspect that he knew something of the Lord and of a special mountain where this God seemed to dwell. Also, I suspect that he was aware that Moses was not a happy man, that there was something missing, some unfulfilled calling upon his life. And perhaps he even wondered if that had something do with this mysterious God of the mountain. So Jethro said, "Take the flock and go to the other side of the mountain of God, the mountain called Horeb or sometimes Sinai."

So that's what he did, and one day he saw something that he had never seen before, a bush that was on fire and yet not consumed by the flames. Curious as to what this strange sight was, he drew near and that's when he heard someone call his name, "Moses, Moses." He replied, "Here I am." Then that same voice said, "Take off your sandals for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. The Lord introduced Himself. He said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Realizing that he was indeed on holy ground, Moses hid his face in fear of looking upon the face of God.

Then God told Moses what He intended to do. He had heard the cries of His people and was going to rescue them from slavery and bring them to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Furthermore, He had chosen Moses to be the person who would go to Pharaoh and bring the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses was shocked. Why would God want a person like him, a wandering shepherd who was a fugitive from justice, to confront the king of one of the greatest nations on earth? But that's what God wanted him to do and that's what he reiterated in verse 12. The Lord said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Now, let me call your attention to three words in this verse of Scripture. The first is the word "sign." You will find that it is mentioned over 50 times in the Bible. In most instances it is an event or activity which clearly indicated that God is directly and personally involved in the lives of His people. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, chapter two, verses eight through twelve, an angel announces the birth of the Messiah. He then tells the shepherds that there is a sign which will verify that he is speaking the truth. They can go and check it out for themselves. They will find this child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, a food trough for animals, a most unlikely location for a newborn child. Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah speaking for the Lord had also spoken of a sign, an indication of God's participation in the affairs of mankind. Speaking to the king of Judah he said, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and

will call him Immanuel.” Of course, we know that this sign was not only for the day and time in which it was given but also an indication or promise from the Lord regarding the birth of Jesus Christ.

But what about you and me? Can we become signs or verifications of what God desires to accomplish. That’s precisely what the Lord was saying to Moses. When the people of Israel arrived at the mountain to worship God, that would be a clear and unmistakable indication that the Lord was with Moses and that He had chosen him to lead His people. The same can be true for us as well. When we gather together for worship, it is a sign or an indication that God is with us and that He has called us to be His people. Let me share an example with you. Many years ago I went on a short term mission trip to India. One Sunday morning I experienced something that I have never forgotten. There were groups of people out for a stroll. They were walking along, conversing with one another, and seemed to be headed in a specific direction. Their dress, their congeniality, and indeed their very countenance clearly indicated that they were Christians on their way to worship the Lord. I had discovered that there were many different religions in India, but I knew who these people were. They were fellow believers and they were on their way to church. It was like they were wearing signs which stated, “We are Christians who have been called by the Lord to serve and honor Him.”

And the same is true of us. When we gather together for worship, that’s a sign of our relationship with the Lord. Of course, I know that sometimes when we gather for worship we’re just going through the motions because we’re so distracted by everything else that’s going on around us. And yes, I know that some people think that just showing up for church means that they are Christians even though they have no idea who God really is. But when you get right down to it, worshipping the Lord is one of the evidences that God is with us and that we are His people. However, it’s not the only one. When we really begin to study His Word, when we pray with genuine earnestness, when we are willing to tell others about Him, when we live godly lives, and most importantly when we receive Him as our Lord and Savior, all of these things, like worship, are signs that God is with us.

Now let’s take a look at the second word, “mountain.” Like the word “sign” mountains are mentioned throughout the Bible. Noah’s ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat. Moses at the end of his life looks over the Promised Land from Mount Nebo. Christ experiences the transfiguration on a high mountain and prays on the last night of life on the Mount of Olives. Psalm 121, verses one and two declare, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” When the Jewish people went to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the temple, they always spoke of going up to the city because he was located on a high plateau known as Mount Zion. And then there is the story of Elijah’s flight to Mount Sinai in 1 Kings 19:1-19. Fleeing from Jezebel, he goes to the

very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. He wants, in fact, he desperately desires to encounter God presence. He is tired, he discouraged, he is fearful. He wants to talk with God, and that is where Elijah meets the Lord as he stands at the mouth of a cave on the mountain.

Like Elijah and like the people of Israel, people still go to the mountains to meet with the Lord. There was a lady in one of the churches that I pastored who went to Ridgecrest, a Baptist conference center in the mountains near Asheville, North Carolina. Every year when she returned she would enthusiastically declare, "I've been to the mountain." And some of you sitting right here this morning have been to the mountain, a place called "Massenetta." You would be surprised how many Christian camps are located in the mountains. The reason is quite simple. They are places where we can draw near to the Lord, perhaps because they are little closer to what we think of as heaven, the place where God dwells. In fact, if you and I journeyed to South Korea, we could visit "Prayer Mountain." It's located fairly close to the border of North Korea. Throughout the year thousands of Christians have gathered on that mountain to pray in all kinds of weather. Even when it's raining or snowing people climb the mountain with their umbrellas and tarps to gather together for prayer. In light of what is going on in that part of the world today, I suspect there are a lot of people praying on Prayer Mountain.

And perhaps like them we too need to find a mountain, like the Peaks of Otter, so that we can gather together for a time of prayer and communion with the Lord. Most assuredly our world and our nation are in need of it. And that's precisely what the Lord had in mind when he told Moses, "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." The Lord had something in mind that would be truly transformational for the people of Israel which can be summed up in one word, "worship." So let's turn our attention to this word and what it means for us as God's people.

The word "worship" comes from an old English word which means "to make worthy, to admire, and to show reverence or devotion." When the Lord called Moses to bring the people out of Egypt, it was for the purpose, therefore, of worshipping Him. In fact, when Moses and Aaron met with Pharaoh for the first time, they told him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness'" (Exodus 5:1). In other words, they had been summoned by the Lord to meet with Him and to worship Him. But what about today? What does this word mean for us in this day and time? Is it what we do on Sunday mornings? Is simply singing, praying, and hearing God's Word, or is there some deeper and more significant meaning. Let me suggest two possibilities.

First of all, worship is adoration. It is that sensation of devotion and delight which we experience when we want to be with someone whom we admire. It's that kind of joy that wells

up within us when we are in the presence of the love of our lives, that special person who is so wonderful that we can't imagine living without them. With all of our being we just want to be with them. We want to sing their praises, to extol their virtues, and to declare their loveliness. And that's precisely what we find throughout the Scriptures with regards to worshipping God, especially in places like the book of Psalms. Take, for example, Psalm 95, especially verses 6-7, which declares, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care." This attitude of adoration can also be found in other places such as when David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem. He was dancing and celebrating before the ark as it was brought into the city (1 Chronicles 15:29), and he wrote a psalm of praise for the occasion, two verses of which read, "Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength, ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name. Bring an offering and come before Him; worship the LORD in the splendor of His holiness" (1 Chronicles 16:28-29).

I don't know about you, but I hope there have been occasions when you have felt just like David did when he brought the ark into Jerusalem. He was worshipping the Lord with great joy and enthusiasm, and I hope there have been times in your life when you felt the same way. It's a wonderful experience that can take place when a church family has gathered together for worship as well as individually when we sense God's presence.

Jonathan Edwards was one of the most gifted and brightest intellects of Colonial America. He was a powerful preacher, a gifted theologian, and the father of the First Great Spiritual Awakening. He was also a man who had marvelous experiences with the Lord. Frequently he would go for rides through the forest for contemplation and refreshment, and in his writings he describes what took place on one of those occasions.

Once, as I rid out into the woods for my health, anno 1737, and having lit from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer; I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God; as mediator between God and man; and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condensation. This grace, that appeared to me so calm and sweet, appeared great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception. Which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me, the bigger part of the time, in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt withal, an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, than to be emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him and with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him, and to be totally wrapped up

in the fullness of Christ; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity.

Although most of us will probably not have this kind of experience, it is a description of what worship can become when we acknowledge and praise God's greatness and majesty, when we bow down and worship him like the Wise Men did when they greeted the Christ Child.

There is another aspect of worship, however, which you may not have ever thought of. Worship involves not only admiration but also imitation. It is an opportunity to both adore the Lord and to acquire His nature and character. Centuries ago, Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor wrote, "We should consider that imitation is the most acceptable part of worship." He was not a Christian. Nevertheless, I think he was on to something. In other words the best way to honor the Lord and to express our love for Him is to become like Him. For example, have you ever heard someone say of a particular couple that their love for one another over the years had been so constant and steadfast that they actually began to speak and even look like one another. The same kind of thing happens when we spend time with the Lord. That's why He wanted to meet with the Israelites at the mountain. He was going to transform them into a people who would not only get to know Him but who would also gradually become like Him. They would become a holy or special nation and a bridge between God and all of mankind. Or as the Lord Himself said, "You will become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). But what about us? Does that hold true for God's people in the twenty-first century?

Over the years I have had the opportunity of meeting a number of people who were really close to the Lord, who really spent time in His presence, and who delighted in worshipping Him. Without exception they possessed the nature and character of Christ. They weren't perfect, they didn't become some kind of divine beings, but there was a presence within their lives that set them apart. Day by day they strived to become more and more like Christ because they knew that this would please the Lord. It would also reflect the fact that by the power of God's Spirit their lives were gradually being transformed into the likeness of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is what God desires to do in all of our lives, and it is the best way in which we can truly worship Him. Paul certainly had that in mind when he wrote, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). And that is also what he is saying to us in his letter to the Ephesians. Speaking about what he hoped would transpire in the church at Ephesus, he said, "It was he (Christ) who gave some to apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

So to wrap things up, let's get started on our journey to the mountain of God. Let's find those times and places, whether or not it's a mountain, where we can hopefully encounter His presence. Let's learn how to worship the Lord as we both adore Him and become more like His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, when we do gather for worship, as well as how we live out our lives day by day, may all of these experiences be a clear and unmistakable sign of our relationship with the Lord.