

WHO SHALL CLIMB THE LORD'S MOUNTAIN
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 3, 2017
based on John 3:13-15; Psalm 24:3-6

The sermon this morning is the beginning of an Advent sermon series entitled, "God Turns the Tables," during which we will consider how the message of Christmas in many ways reverses the common ideas and attitudes of our age. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

"Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord?" says the Psalmist in Psalm 24. (Psalm 24:3) God through the ages has often been envisioned as being on the top of a mountain. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods dwelled on Mt. Olympus, and they built their worship center at Delphi, on the top of a high mountain. The Hebrew people also built their temple on Mt. Zion, which is not exactly a mountain by our standards, but which is an elevated place in the area.

People have also in fact experienced God on the tops of mountains. In the Bible, there is the case of Moses who encountered God on the top of Mt. Sinai, or there is the time when Jesus took three of his disciples to the top of a mountain where the transfiguration occurred. Perhaps there is something about mountains—the grandeur, the sense of being lifted up towards the heavens—which make mountains a place especially conducive to the experience of the presence of God.

Of course, God is actually no more present on a mountain than God is in a valley. We can experience God's presence everywhere. Yet there is something about the image of God being on the top of a mountain which people have sensed to be true in a spiritual way. We rightfully think of God as being in a spiritual sense above us—God is perfectly good and holy and almighty—while we are far below God, small and sinful. If we are to reach God, therefore, it seems that we must climb upward. We must somehow rise up above our sinfulness and wretchedness and reach up to God. Therefore in the human imagination the journey to God has often been envisioned as being like climbing a mountain. Here is it to be expected that the journey to God will be a long, arduous process; but the hope is that if we persist, we will gradually become more holy until we arrive at the top and are able to stand in God's holy place.

Along this line, one of the greatest Spanish language books of all time was a book entitled, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, by the 16th century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross. It is not about mountain climbing. It is about the spiritual journey, which is pictured an upward climb of the spirit. This image of ascending the mountain continues to be one of the most common images that people have in mind when they think of the spiritual journey today. It is often suggested, for example, that different religions are different paths up the mountain of God. So whether it is a Muslim striving to follow the stipulations of the Koran, or a Buddhist diligently following a pattern of meditation, or a Hindu engaged in pilgrimage and ritual,

people are seeking to somehow raise themselves up to enter into the divine presence.

In this context, the Psalmist raises the further question, “Who will ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who ultimately will arrive and stand in God's holy place?” (Psalm 24:3) The answer is simple and yet daunting—“those who have clean hands and pure hearts.” (Psalm 24:4)

The phrase “clean hands” refers to our actions. To have clean hands means that we have done nothing wrong, that we are free from any stain of sin in our actions. The phrase “pure hearts” refers to our desires. To have a pure heart means that we do not set our desires on anything unworthy—or as the Psalm puts it, “we do not lift up our soul to what is false” (Psalm 24:4b)—but we desire purely the will of God. In short, to have clean hands and a pure heart means that we are purely good; and indeed there is a strong sense in the Bible that no one who is sinful can stand before the holiness of God.

On this basis, it appears that there are not going to be many people on top of God's mountain, because by and large we do not have clean hands—we are imperfect in our actions—and having a pure heart is one of the most difficult of all goals to attain. Indeed if religion generally means climbing God's mountain, it is finally going to be a frustrating and fruitless endeavor, because we will always stumble, we will always slip back into imperfection, and we will never reach the goal.

Here it is crucial to recognize that what the gospel finally offers is precisely the opposite of this whole mountain-climbing approach. The revolutionary proclamation of the gospel is that God has come down the mountain.

This is the essential message of Christmas—God has come down the mountain, God has come to our level in Jesus. We see this in the birth of Jesus, as Jesus is born in a very common place to common parents. In Jesus, God connects with us where we are. Jesus would later speak of this in the passage we heard from the gospel of John, where Jesus said, “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man [by which he referred to himself].” (John 3:13) Jesus here makes two clear points. First, no one has ascended into heaven, which declares that human beings can never spiritually elevate themselves to God. But secondly, Jesus speaks of how he has “descended from heaven,” which means that God through Jesus has come down to us.

In this regard, Jesus is actually the fulfillment of a grand theme that we see unfolding throughout the Old Testament. The Old Testament pictures God as being above us, reigning over all, but the Old Testament does not suggest that God simply stays in some far off, high place; rather a central idea is that God comes to dwell among the people. In Old Testament times, the point where people believed God especially did this was the temple. The temple was understood to be God's house, where God dwelled in the midst of His people.

This dynamic is particularly apparent in Psalm 24, which was actually used in dramatic way for a liturgy in the temple in Jerusalem. People would walk up Mount Zion and enter into the temple; and then someone would read these words to all who were standing there: “Who

can ascend the mountain of the Lord; who can stand in His holy place—those who have clean hands and a pure heart.” Well, of course, none of them standing there had clean hands or a pure heart—they were all sinners—but they were standing in the temple, where sacrifices were made on their behalf so that they could be forgiven. Thus they had a strong sense that they were there in God’s house not because they deserved it but because of God’s mercy—because through those temple sacrifices God was pouring his grace upon them, cleansing their hands and hearts. Then the Psalm continues: “Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.” (Psalm 24:7) It is believed that at this point certain gates and doors in the temple were actually opened. And the reader then would go on with the Psalm, saying, “Who is the King of glory?—the Lord, strong and mighty!” (Psalm 24:8) Then he would repeat the line, “Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the king of glory may come in.” (Psalm 24:9) So they enacted the message that God was entering with grace and power into the midst of the people and that God was present among them.

Centuries later, Jesus said that he is now the temple—the point where God comes to dwell in the midst of His people. Once again, we do not have clean hands and pure hearts; but through the sacrifice that Christ has made for us, we find forgiveness. Thus just as the ancient Israelites experienced the King of glory entering into their midst, so now through Christ all of humanity can experience the King of glory coming with grace and saving power to dwell with us.

But one other feature of that ancient Psalm also remains very true—there was a call to open up the doors so that the King could enter in. So today God descends to us through Christ, but we must open up the doors of our hearts so that the Lord may truly enter in.

The mountain climbing image for the spiritual life has been popular for ages, but a spiritual transformation occurs when we realize that the actual movement goes the other way—God comes down to us. Then we realize that the spiritual journey is not a matter of trying to struggle up the mountain; the spiritual journey is a matter of joining in faith with Christ as He comes to us, and journeying then with him as he continues to reach to the imperfect and the lowly, sharing the mercy and the compassion of God.

This whole message—that Christ has come with grace into our midst—is profoundly illustrated in the sacrament of Communion. As we receive Communion this morning, may we indeed open the doors of our lives so that Christ may dwell in us.