



March 13, 2011
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Moving Mountains: Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Ararat

Genesis 8 & 9

I love mountains. One of the crowning achievements of my life was making it to the top of Mt. Rainier with my friend, Rich Jasper. I've hiked Ben Nevis in Scotland, been to the top of Half Dome, scrambled up Pinnacle Peak. I'm no great mountain climber but I do find it exhilarating to stand at the top peak and look out over the vista below. How many of you share that passion? (How many of you are terrified by the idea?) There are a lot of mountains in the Bible. Can you name them? Mt. Sinai, Mt. Moriah, Mt. Tabor, Mt. Carmel, Mt. of Olives, Mt. of Beatitudes. When you travel with me to Israel, we will stand on those mountains.

Last summer, I reflected on the mountains of the Bible...and how inspiring it would be for us to "visit" some of them in a sermon series. Then as I studied what happened there—what God taught or did or revealed on the top of mountains—I realized how often that teaching was in conflict with cherished American values...even cherished American religious values.

What do I mean by that? Okay...one cherished American value is this: "My number one job as a parent is to keep my children safe and happy." Right? And yet, when we climb Mt. Moriah next week, we'll discover that's not necessarily true. Sometimes God calls children to places that are not at all safe. Or how about this claim: "Truth is relative. What's true for you may not be true for me." "Rubbish," proclaims Mt. Sinai. "Religion is a private matter." "No it is not," says the Mt. of Ascension." "Everybody is going to heaven... except for Adolf Hitler." "Not so," says the mountain in Revelation. "Jesus is my Savior but he's not yet my Lord." "Impossible," says Mt. of Beatitudes. "All faiths are the same." "No they are not," cries Paul on Mars Hill. "I'm a good person." "No you are not," declares Mt. Calvary.

The more I studied the mountains of the Bible...the more I realized that God used mountaintop experiences to set his people straight! To say to them, "You are headed the wrong way. You believe the wrong things. You are in error." Now what do we call spiritual error! Heresy! I know it's a loaded word, but I'm going to stick with it. False teaching is heresy. So, over the next few weeks, I want to let the mountains of the Bible challenge the heresies of our culture. Are you up for the journey?

So here's the first heresy. **"You don't need the Church to be a Christian."** I heard it twice this week. I invited my neighbor to church. She said, "I don't need to go to church... I have my own belief system." I asked another friend why he doesn't come to church and he said, "I don't need to; I hang out with Christians all the time." How many of you have heard something like this? Or said something like this?

So can you be a Christian without the Church? Well the first mountain in the Bible speaks to that. Ararat... the story of Noah and the ark. It covers four chapters in Genesis; let's look at parts of it.

6:5 *The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ...for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD...*

When God created man, he gave him the gift of free will...and he didn't do well with that gift. **"EVERY inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."** How did that make God feel? **"Grieved...filled with pain."** Every human being so lovingly created by God had now corrupted themselves. All except for one. **"Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord."** So God decides to press the reset button. He will send a great flood, wipe out corrupt humanity and start over again. He orders Noah to build a great ship—an ark—to gather two of every animal into that ark, and to wait.

Noah obeys. For 120 years, he and his sons work on that boat, enduring the ridicule of his neighbors. Then one day, the animals started showing up.

7:6 *Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood...*

God shuts the door to the ark...and the rain comes. 40 days and forty nights it rains. Then they bob in the ark for more than a year. Everything outside is destroyed.

8.1 *But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.*

The story of Noah is a story of God's holiness, humanity's sinfulness, God's judgment and God's salvation. It's also the story of God's covenant promise with Noah and his ancestors. He promises never to send a flood again; never to handle human wickedness by washing us all away. And gives a sign of that promise. What? The rainbow.

The stories of the Old Testament, like this one, are important because of what they tell. But for the Christian, they are also important for what they **foretell**. And here is where you need to buckle up with me, okay? **The Old Testament is full of images that point to the future.** This is a kind of prophecy called "typology." "Types" give us a glimpse of a future event. For example, when Abraham takes his son Isaac up Mount Moriah to sacrifice him, what is that a type of? When God will sacrifice his son Jesus on a mountain called Calvary. When the Israelites sacrifice a spotless, perfect lamb for Passover, that is a "type" of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb. David was a type of Jesus as king. The Promised Land was a type of heaven. Does that make sense? A "type" is an Old Testament image that looks ahead to a New Testament reality and there are scores of them.

Now let's circle back to our story. **Do you know what Noah's ark is a "type" of? The Church.** Peter thought so. In his first letter, Peter said that the flood symbolized baptism, the washing away of sin, and that the ark represented the place of spiritual safety. A third century bishop named Cyprian wrote, "In saying this, Peter proves with his testimony that the one ark of Noah was a type of the one church." Cyprian later goes on to say it even more emphatically: "There is no salvation outside the Church."

Other theologians might not state it this adamantly, but for 2000 years, they have agreed; **Noah's ark looks ahead to the church of Jesus Christ where every man, woman and child who wants to be saved can find refuge and salvation.** If you were not in the ark, you were lost. There was no other way to be saved than to be sealed by God inside the ark. In the same way, the New Testament knows of no other way that you can be saved than to be "sealed" safely inside the ark of Jesus...His Church. In other words, to answer the big question of the day, **No, you cannot be a Christian without the Church.** There are no independent Christians in the New Testament. When Jesus called disciples, he called them into community. When new believers were baptized, they weren't baptized as a solo follower of Jesus. They were baptized into the Church.

So let me say it again: to claim that you don't need the Church in order to be a Christian—to claim that you can float around on your own as a follower of Jesus—is false teaching. It is popular these days, but it is heresy. It is an invention of our modern culture that wants the advantages of being saved from hell without the annoyance of obeying Jesus' command to live in community. The New Testament teaches no such thing.

Have you heard this teaching before? Maybe not. I don't think I've been as clear as I believe about this. And I'm certain the broader Christian culture has done a lousy job of lifting up the essential role of the Church in salvation. Today's Christianity is just about me and Jesus. I accept Jesus as my savior, I receive my "Get Out of Hell Free" card, and then I can go on my way, living my life anyway I want to, because I've purchased my eternal fire insurance.

If that's what you believe, I'm telling you, that's not what the Bible says. You are just making that up. The call to be a Christian is a call to be "sealed"—"locked"—into community. In fact, do you remember Paul's favorite metaphor for the Church? The Body of Christ. Is there anything more linked together than a body? In I Corinthians 12 Paul points out how ridiculous it is for people to say, "I don't need the Church" by comparing those renegades to amputated body parts. Do you remember? ***"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you...you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it!"***

This is my beloved Grandpa Bert. One day, Grandpa was working on his lawnmower. While it was still going, he reached his hand underneath the mower to free up a stuck wheel. Guess what happened? Yep. Chopped off his ring finger. Grandma rushed him off to the hospital. After they left, another family member went exploring in the yard to see if he could find Grandpa's missing finger. And he did! It was all gnarly, chewed up, covered with dirt and grass. He washed it off, wrapped it up in a handkerchief and took it to the hospital to be sewed back on. Guess what? It was too late. The finger was dead. They just pulled a flap of skin over Grandpa's stump and sewed it up. And what about Grandpa's finger? What was it good for? It couldn't point, it couldn't scratch, it couldn't pick, it couldn't grab. It was good for nothing.

The person who says, "I don't need the Church to be a Christian," is just like the digit that says, "I don't need the hand to be a finger." Really? Really? "I can be a part of the Body of Christ without plugging into the Body of Christ. All by myself... I can be a Christian." Do you see how foolish that is? How arrogant? If the finger isn't plugged into the body it's not going to live...it's not going to function, it's not going to have any purpose, and it'll just sit out there rotting away. And that's exactly what happens to the person who ignores what the Bible actually says about what it means to be a Christian...which is...being saved by Jesus and being plugged into his life-giving body.

Am I being clear? You cannot be a Christian without the Church. Period. The Church is what Jesus saves you **into**. And the Church is the means Jesus uses to keep saving you; to keep growing you; to keep making you more like him. It is into and through the Church that we are saved by Jesus. That's His plan; it's the way He does it. We may think His plan stinks—like rotten finger—but that is His plan.

Now let me be clear about what I am **not** saying. I'm not saying that Chapel Hill is the **only** church. There are many wonderful churches in our community. If we aren't a good fit, find one that is. Just don't be so arrogant to think that you can go it alone! And don't sit on the sidelines and snipe. Plug in somewhere. And I'm also not saying that coming for one hour on a Sunday morning is enough. It's not. Worship is important. It feeds us and anchors us, but if this is all you are doing you

still are not really in the Church. **Being in the Church means plugging into the Body of Christ.**

Back to grandpa's finger for a moment. Being plugged into the Body of Christ means four things:

It means nourishment. Without the lifeblood flowing into that finger, it could not survive on its own. How ridiculous to imagine that it could nourish itself. Being part of the Body of Christ means that we are studying, learning, growing, and being nurtured together. We need spiritual lifeblood—teaching, sacraments, worship—and when we aren't connected to the body, when we don't get that... our spirits shrivel up and die, no matter how independent we pretend to be.

It means connection. Really, how ridiculous does this look? A finger all by itself... still claiming to be a part of the body? Every human being needs to belong. Being plugged into the Body of Christ means that we are meeting that deepest of human needs... the need for intimate community. The evangelist Dwight L. Moody went to visit a man at his home one evening. They sat in front of the fire as the man told Moody why he didn't need to be in a church to be a Christian. As the man talked, Moody took the fireplace poker and pulled one of the burning logs out of the fire onto the hearth. They just watched as, quickly, the fire on the log died out. The man looked for a moment and then all he said was, "I see." To be plugged into the Body of Christ means connection. That's why LifeGroups are so essential. We can never have this sense of community—of connectedness—with one hour of worship on a Sunday morning.

It means purpose. Paul's whole point in I Corinthians 12 is that every body part has a purpose. If you are a finger off by yourself...honestly...what good are you? What difference are you making? How are you helping the rest of the Body do what God calls us to do? We weren't just saved from something; we were saved for something. Jesus saved us so that we could help him save the world. If that's not true—if we're just saved so that we can go to heaven—why don't we just die and go to heaven as soon as we accept Jesus? Because He's saved us to serve. How much good are you to Christ's mission if you look like this?

It means healing. The other day I was pulling up blackberry bushes. I got pretty scratched up. But immediately, my body went to work fighting infection and healing me up. Being plugged into the Body of Christ means being connected to others who will protect you, hold you accountable, help you heal. I can think of three people right now with whom I am trying to connect who are struggling. They know they need accountability, they know they need support and encouragement, but they continue to hold their distance. They are not plugged in, and they risk real peril because they are not connected.

That's why you need to plug into the Body of Christ. That's why you can't be a Christian all by yourself. That's why you need the Church. So the next time you

hear someone say, "I don't need the Church to be a Christian," I hope you'll have the courage to give them the finger!

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Read Genesis 6: 5-14. How is God revealed in this passage? What is the problem? What does he decide to do about it?

2. Read Genesis 7: 6-9; 8: 1-4; 9: 8-17. Bible scholars view the ark as an image, a "type," of the church. What do you think of that analogy?

3. In light of what you heard in the message, how would you respond to the comment, "I don't need the church to be a Christian."