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Moving Mountains: City on a Little Mountain Matthew 5:13-16

Some of the most exciting moments of my life have occurred on mountaintops. I'm no great mountain climber, but reaching the top of Mt. Rainier and Half Dome and Pinnacle Peak with friends and family members produced memories that I will treasure my whole life. Then about two years ago, I began thinking about what a fun sermon series this might be... all of the important things that happened on top of mountains in the Bible.

So for the past four months, we have been climbing mountains and asking what God would teach us there. We've been to the top of Ararat with Noah and to Moriah with Abraham and Isaac. Moses took us to the top of two mountains, remember? Sinai and Nebo. Elijah the prophet took us to Mt. Carmel, and when he got depressed he took us to Mt. Horeb. In the New Testament, Paul guided us to Mars Hill, and John gave us a glimpse from the Mt. of Judgment in Revelation. And we did a lot of climbing with Jesus: the Mt. of Temptation, Mt. of Transfiguration, Mt. Calvary, the Mt. of the Great Commission, and the Mt. of Olives where Jesus ascended back to the Father in heaven.

This morning, we are dropping the elevation a bit. We're moving from a mountain down to a hill. But it's a very important hill, and Jesus mentions it in his most famous sermon... the Sermon on the... yes, the Sermon on the Mountain.
[Read Mt. 5:13-16]

Did you see the little mountain? "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." What did Jesus have in mind when he spoke those words? "A city on a hill cannot be hidden."

The book of Psalms contains a subsection, chapters 120-134. Anyone remember what that collection of 15 psalms is called? The Psalms of Ascent. "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"... "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." ... "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." ... "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain."

Those verses are familiar to us, aren't they? Beloved passages that have been part of our entire worship lives. But **why** are these called the "Psalms of Ascent." What were they ascending to? Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built on a hill. Those who travel with me to Israel never forget their first glimpse of Jerusalem, perched as it is on a

hill. You have to go “up” to get to Jerusalem. In fact, anytime you speak of traveling to Jerusalem, you always say you are going “up” to Jerusalem. The Psalms of Ascent were the psalms that Jewish pilgrims sang as they made their way up to Jerusalem, a city set on a hill.

And if you were going up to Jerusalem in Jesus’ time, you would have known when you were getting close. Because sitting on top of the highest hill was the temple—one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. And it was bright white and covered with so much gold that when the sun struck it... it would shine; it would sparkle so brightly, that you could see it from miles away!

Jesus probably had Jerusalem in mind when He taught these words. But He wasn’t speaking **about** Jerusalem. He was speaking about His people... those who were gathered around Him on the mountain beside the Sea of Galilee. His followers... His disciples. “**You** are a city set on a hill... a city that cannot be hidden. You will be conspicuous. You will be present in your culture. You will be seen and tasted and experienced. You will make things better in this world.”

That must have sounded awfully audacious to the ears of peasants and fishermen and farmers sitting on a hill in Podunk Galilee, an embarrassing rump region north of Jerusalem. Galileans were hicks... hillbillies. They were the “Larry the Cable Guys” of their time. **Jerusalem** was the shining city on a hill. Jerusalem was where the important people lived... where real religion was practiced. **Jerusalem was everything and a bag of chips.** But that morning Jesus said, “No, **you** are the city on a hill. By **your** conspicuous presence, I will change the whole world.”

“C’mon, Jesus. Really? Look at us,” they must have thought to themselves. “We’re not world-changers. You are talking crazy talk.” But that’s what he said. Let’s take a closer look.

This comes early in the Sermon on the Mount. But it’s not the very beginning. How does Jesus begin His most famous sermon—The Beatitudes? With blessing! Before Jesus asks a thing of us, **before** He offers any expectation—lays down any demands—He first blesses those people. I wonder if they raised their hands to receive it. To those who seemed to have the least to offer—the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the spiritually hungry and thirsty, the persecuted—Jesus offered blessing. That is always Jesus’ starting point! Grace.

I can think of four different people I spoke to this week who are so beaten up by life right now—they feel like they have nothing to give. They are just trying to survive. They **are** poor and sad and meek and starving... and to those souls and everyone like them this morning, Jesus—gracious Jesus—starts out his sermon to us with words of incredible grace. “You are blessed!” You broken, helpless, inadequate souls... I bless you!”

But that's just his **starting point**. It is these broken, helpless, inadequate... but **bless-ed souls** that Jesus goes on to describe as "a city on a hill." A conspicuous, shining, influential, world-changing force for God's good. And He makes His point with two "**you ares**." Did you see them? "You are the salt of the earth." and "You are the light of the world." Notice Jesus doesn't say, "I **want** you to be salty. I **expect** you to become shiny." Nope. He declares it as so: "You **are** the salt of the earth. You **are** the light of the world. You are mine. You belong to me. And because you are mine, I declare it. You are salty. You are shiny. I make it so. I decree it."

Salt was a precious commodity in the time of Jesus. Before there was any such thing as a G.E. Side by Side—monstrous refrigerator where my son lives—it was salt that preserved food. If you didn't want your freshly butchered meat to be crawling with maggots in the Middle Eastern sun, you better salt it. **And** salt did for them what salt still does for us. It added flavor. It made food taste better. It's a good thing I have low blood pressure (that's because I'm so easy going)—it's a good thing because I love salt. I even salt my watermelon. Any of you do that? It just tastes better to me.

Jesus decreed—to that bunch of Galilean nobodies—that they **were** salt. That by their presence they would help keep their culture from turning all wormy and rotten. By their presence they would make life taste better. **And how widespread would that influence be?** In their own homes? Their own towns? In Podunk Galilee? No...they would be the salt of the earth! The whole world would be less rotten... the whole world would taste better because of Christ-followers.

And how does that work, exactly? How do we bring the preserving, enhancing influence of Jesus to bear upon our world? Well, this is the church. There we are... right there inside. And this is what we've got to do! [Shake salt] You gotta get out of the shaker. (Hope there aren't any slugs in the audience today!) It's only when salt lands on meat that it preserves it... only when it lands on potatoes that it flavors them. It is only when God's people fling themselves out into their community—right in the middle of the culture that wants to go rotten, that tends to go wormy, that tends to become more and more bland no matter how hard it tries to stay exciting—only when we sprinkle ourselves all over the place can we make the difference that Jesus declares. **You are the salt of the earth!**

And what about that second "you are?" "You are the light of the world!" Notice again—not just Nazareth or Samaria or Palestine—you are the light of the whole darned world. Really? Yes, really! And what does light do? **It shows the way, it reveals truth, it shows what is really there, it purifies, it prevents accident and mischief and evil.** And how does light accomplish those things? By shining. Conspicuously! Not in a little corner. Not hidden under a basket. But set on a stand—filling the house with illumination. Or like a bright city set on a Hill, filling the world with illumination.

Up until now, Jesus has just been declaring who they are. “You **are** salt. You **are** light. If you are mine, that is what you are.” But now, for the first time in His sermon, Jesus gives them a command. Did you see it? Shine! V. 16: “Let your light shine...” You are a reflector dish. You are made to reflect my light. So, shine! Reflect me. Live as if you really believe in me. Do good in your community as if you really take me seriously. Be kind and generous and loving and forgiving. Shine! Because when you do, you will be like a beautiful city perched on a hill. Everyone will see. Everyone will notice. Everyone will benefit because you are here.

And why do we do these things? **So that** everyone will notice how shiny **we** are? What good people we are? How religious we are? No. “When people see your good deeds they will give praise to your Father in heaven.” Everything we do as salt and light in the world... all of it points not to ourselves but to God who, alone, is worthy of praise.

A city on a hill. You know, don't you, why I wanted to preach this sermon to wrap up our series? Look at us! Where are we located? On a hill! What's our name? Chapel Hill! We are a little city set on a hill. The question is—are we what Jesus means when He speaks of a City on a Hill? Are we conspicuous in our presence, or are we hiding behind our walls up here? Are we sprinkling ourselves out among our community, preserving life, flavoring life, **or are we hiding from life?** Are we a place that stands for truth? That shines light on things that promote evil? Do we want to be the sort of place where people who don't yet even know God look to and trust to guide them into real life because of what they see in us?

I've been thinking about a tag line for Chapel Hill recently. One little phrase that might capture who we are, what we believe, what we long to be. Just a few words that you could put in an ad or on a coffee mug or baseball hat that would summarize who we are. If you have some ideas, I would love to hear them. We might even have a contest for the best tagline. Would you like to hear my best shot at a tagline so far? Ready? “One hill of a church.” What do you think? Too naughty? Maybe, but I like it! To be “one hill of a church” like Jesus spoke of: preserving, flavoring, revealing, clarifying, purifying life in our world, and glorifying God in the process. One hill of a church.

I was talking with my LifeGroup last Friday about this sermon series and how it had affected me. How helpful it had been to me, personally, and how God used what I learned from these mountain stories to prepare me—and maybe prepare us all—for the denominational issues that I had no idea were coming when I started listing all the mountains of the Bible on a piece of paper. But God knew what was coming... and these mountains have blessed me and taught me.

Mt. Ararat reminded me that there is no such thing as being a Christian without the Church. This—right here—is how we learn what it means to be in Christ. **Abraham on Mt Moriah** with his son Isaac reminded me that God calls us to place our children on the altar—to offer them to Him for a life of service—even when it isn't safe to do so. **Sinai** reminded me that there is such a thing as objective Truth with a capital T; that God and His ways are truth, and that truth is worth knowing and worth defending. **Elijah on Mt. Carmel** with the prophets of Baal reminded me that sometimes you have to stand courageously against the influence of religion and cultures that would turn us away from God's Truth. Sometimes you have to take a stand.

Jesus on the **Mount of Temptation** reminded me that the Devil is alive and well and that if we don't resist him, he will destroy us. The **Mt. of Transfiguration** reminded me that Jesus Christ alone is the divine reflection of the Father; there is no other. **Mt. Calvary** reminded me that Jesus Christ alone is the atonement for our sins of the world. And the **Mt. of Olives** reminded me that Jesus Christ alone will return to judge the world. And, in the meantime, we have work to do, salt to sprinkle, and light to shine.

I don't know if I've ever been more excited for our future as a congregation than I am right now. Because I believe that, by God's grace, we have sought to live up to our name. **To be a chapel on a hill:** conspicuous, present, serving and protecting and preserving and enlightening our community—not because of who we are but because of Whose we are—not to bring credit to ourselves but to bring glory to God. And as we consider a new future, a new denomination possibly, a new call from God... I'm not anxious at all! I'm excited. The future has never looked brighter!

I hope you will be here Wednesday night for our next Town Hall Meeting... all of you, whatever your opinion might be. It will be the next step in our journey together. And wherever God is leading us—however we get there—**I hope when we arrive there our community will look up here and say, "That's one hill of a church!"**

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. What are the two "you are" statements in this text? Why does Jesus declare **who** we are before He says **what** we must do?

2. What does it mean to be salt and light? Can we REALLY expect to be that to the entire world? Isn't that audacious?

3. What do YOU think it means for Chapel Hill to be a "city on a hill?" What are we called to offer to our community from this vantage point? In what way are you part of that mission, personally?