

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Transfiguration Sunday  
February 6, 2005

### **All That God Commands**

Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 17:1-9; Isaiah 58?

Today's sermon brings us into a somewhat daunting, mountainous terrain. Biblically speaking, this means we're bound to have an encounter with God.

The ancient Celts believed mountains and rivers to be  
what they called "thin places" –  
places in which earthly human life comes closer into communion  
with spiritual realities.

Certainly throughout the biblical story,  
mountains and rivers factor into God's revelation in a significant way.

Today we have no fewer than five great mountain peaks within our view.

First, we are led up a high mountain with Peter, James, and John  
to witness the Transfiguration of Jesus.  
And on that mountain, God appears, like a bright clouding overshadowing us,  
and claims Jesus as the Beloved Son of God,  
and God commands the disciples to "Listen to him [Jesus]!"

While on the mountain with the Transfigured Jesus  
there appear beside him two figures, Moses and Elijah.  
And, seeing them, we cannot help but remember two other sacred mountain events,  
"thin moments" in which God draws mysteriously and dangerously near:  
one, the giving of the Law to Moses on top of Mount Sinai,  
where God established a covenant with the people of God,  
and, two, Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel,  
in which God rained down fire, accepting Elijah's sacrifice,  
dramatically recalling the people to faithful obedience of  
all that God commands.

Then, today, in Matthew chapter 5,  
Jesus is in the midst of giving his famous sermon, which is given where?  
"On the Mount"!

The fifth mountain today is one that is foreshadowed in the Sermon on the Mount,  
and that is the mountain to which Jesus directs his disciples after his resurrection –  
perhaps even the same mountain in Galilee  
where he had given the Sermon.

And on that mountain Jesus commissions his disciples, saying,  
*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.  
Go, therefore, and make disciples... baptizing them... and  
teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you...*

The reason I draw attention to these 5 mountains,  
is because, throughout the Biblical Story  
the Mountain has been the location of authority and authoritative teaching  
for God's people.

It was so often on the mountain,  
that the powerful presence of God was revealed to the people,  
and from which God commanded the people, and called them to faithful obedience.

Whenever we have a "mountaintop experience" in scripture  
it's good to pay attention to what happens  
because something about the character of God is being revealed.

And that's what this sermon is really about;  
not so much about mountains, as about the character of God.

\* \* \* \* \*

So Jesus, sitting in the seat of teaching authority, says,  
*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law* (think Moses)  
*or the prophets* (think Elijah...or Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and others);  
*I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*

Now this could make us a bit uncomfortable.

There are a lot of very tedious commandments in the Old Testament law,  
having to do with how you prepare your food,  
what food you're allowed and not allowed to eat,  
when you're allowed to be in public and when to keep to yourself,  
what you are and are not allowed to do on the Sabbath  
(probably excludes watching the Super Bowl),  
and which of these offenses will get you shunned, or even stoned,  
or at least abandoned outside the gates of the township.

But the real rub actually comes, not from these little ones, from the Big 10 –  
if you really pay attention to them (as the Upper Room Class just spent time doing)  
most of us don't come off looking too hot,  
even just trying to keep the 10 Commandments.

It would be nice to think that Jesus has made it  
so we don't have to pay attention to all that Old Testament stuff.

It would be nice to think, now that Jesus has come,  
that we don't have to worry about those gloom and doom messages  
of the prophets.

But here Jesus says that  
even the *least* of these commandments, the *least* of these prophecies,  
is important,  
and not one stroke of a letter will pass away  
*until all is accomplished.*

So just what does Jesus mean when he says he has come to *fulfill the law*.  
For help on this question I'll need to rely on the work of our resident NT scholar.

I realize that last week's sermon also quoted Dale Allison,  
but, when you've written the books on the Sermon on the Mount,  
you're fair game for sermons (even in your own church)!

Dale offers us one of those illuminating lists of options  
(if you've been in his class you'll know what I mean)

- #1 – Think of it this way
- #2 – This of it that way
- or #3, and so on...
- #23 – Think of it another way  
(very helpful lists!)

When Jesus says he *fulfills* the law in Matthew he could mean

1. That he adds to the law.  
As in, *You have heard that it was said in ancient times, do not murder,,  
but I say to you, even if you are angry you are liable to judgment.*
2. Or Jesus could mean that *Jesus himself* “does” or “obeys” the law perfectly.
3. Or that Jesus brings the law to perfection with a new law of his own.
4. Or that Jesus fulfills the law by enabling others to keep the Law.
5. Or that Jesus just teaches us to love, and love fulfills all that God commands.
6. Or, since the law and the prophets are mentioned together here,  
that Jesus is the One who fulfills the hopes of the prophets  
that someone will lead the people of God back into faithful obedience.

(Since you didn't have time to write all those down, you'll just have to go buy the book,  
which the Allison's would all appreciate since they're getting into those  
college tuition years.)

The reality is, there is some element of truth to each of these options.

So, given Jesus very strong statement that he has come to *fulfill* the law and the prophets,  
what should be *our* relationship to the law of God?

Does God still command us these days?

Or does a God of love just invite, and coax and encourage us  
to love God back and follow?

Another question: Do we have any use for the Old Testament,  
much of which seems hopelessly anchored to the past,  
unintelligible to modern ears, and so out of our context, our experience  
that it seems utterly irrelevant, and even sometimes un-Christian?

While it is true that Jesus gives us a radically new way of understanding

all that God commands,  
it seems we would be missing the point  
if we simply discarded or ignored the law and prophecy of the Old Testament.  
Jesus' claims that his teaching does not contradict the Old Testament law and prophets,  
which would nullify it for the church,  
but somehow Jesus *fulfills* them.  
So to understand Jesus, and to be good Christians,  
we still need to learn from the law and the prophets,  
which is why, on most Sundays, we read both the Old and the New Testaments.

In conclusion, I have my own list of three points:

1. At the end of the day (or the beginning or the middle of the day, for that matter)  
when it comes to our own faithful obedience to God's law,  
I am most helped by what Jesus calls the *greatest commandment*,  
that we love God, and love our neighbors (including our enemies) as ourselves.  
This really is, I believe, *all that God commands*.

In the words of Gutierrez,  
"Righteousness is not limited to obeying precepts  
(as Matthew understands the Scribes and Pharisees to do)  
but draws its inspiration from an ever new and imaginative love."

2. To learn to love God and others in this way, we must do something;  
we must strive each day, each moment, to live in relationship with Jesus,  
who perfectly fulfills *all that God commands*.

On the mountain in Galilee, Jesus sends his disciples to make disciples,  
and to *teach them to obey all that I have commanded you*.  
And with this command he makes a promise: *I will be with you to the end of the age*.

3. Finally, following Jesus faithfully means to continue to wrestle  
with *all that God commands* in the scriptures.  
Nothing in the scriptures can simply be discarded or ignored,  
for all of it is in some way fulfilled in Jesus.  
To know Jesus more fully, and to know the meaning of love,  
we must know God's law – all that it intends;  
and God's prophets – all that they aspire to.  
Without this content, love becomes nothing more than a warm feeling,  
and finally, becomes whatever *we* want it to be.

Who defines love for *you*?  
Who is *your* authority on matters of life and of death?  
Who stands on *your* mountain?