

Sermon: Sent from the Mountain, Sent from the City

Series: Believe and Encounter

Scripture Reading: Matthew 21:15-19

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16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The best endings are not real endings at all.

Matthew and Luke have that in common.

These two gospel accounts are eager to continue the story because they both refuse to believe that Jesus’ departure from this world will be the end of this transformative journey, marked by the radical proclamation that the kingdom of God has drawn near.

Matthew and Luke refuse to accept Jesus’ departure as a sign of absence. They both refuse to believe that the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham and Jacob, of Ruth and Naomi, of David and Solomon, of Daniel and Isaiah, of Joseph and Mary, would suddenly disappear, vanish, leaving them wandering all alone.

Matthew and Luke refuse to believe in a God who would walk away from his people because that has never been God’s story.

From the very beginning, God has been the One who draws near. The One who visits a barren couple and promises a legacy as vast as the stars in the sky, who hears the cry of the oppressed and parts seas, who shows up beside rivers and burning bushes, who walks through deserts with weary people, who speaks through prophets in seasons of great abundance and

exile, who brings people home and restores lives, and keeps their covenant even when humanity breaks it over and over again.

And now, in Jesus Christ, that same divine presence, that same God, has taken on flesh. Jesus walked dusty roads, touched wounded bodies, wept at gravesides, suffered under violence, and overcame death itself.

This is a God who refuses to abandon us, who remains steadfast when everything else in life collapses and when the world leaves us standing in our loneliness.

It makes sense that Luke and Matthew will not consider the possibility that Christ's ascension to heaven ends this miraculous story.

There is so much more that is about to unfold, not in the same way or through the same characters as before, but through new ordinary people, both doubtful and committed as in the early days after the resurrection, who are now empowered by the extraordinary presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

And it is through this Holy Spirit that the story which began confined to one place and one group of people will move outward into every nation, every language, and every generation.

This is the miraculous story that every one of us has been drawn into — a story that does not end because God's love for us has no end.

C.S. Lewis often spoke about how difficult endings are because a good ending must feel both complete and open.

In his book, *The Last Battle*, which is the last installment in the famous *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis concludes this series in an unexpected way.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this if you are well familiar with these books, as I still find the ending somewhat "unsatisfying" and "challenging."

The *Last Battle* is the only book in the series that starts off in Narnia. It begins with two talking animals: a donkey named Puzzle and an ape named Shift. They find a lion's skin floating in a river, and Shift convinces Puzzle to put it on and pretend to be Aslan, the Great Lion.

Aslan, in case you need to be reminded, is the creator and rightful king of Narnia. Aslan is meant to represent God in the Narnia universe.

Narnia's ending unfolds as the impostor Aslan and the Ape, Shift, convince people to turn against one another, plunging the kingdom into chaos, violence, and destruction.

What also makes this last book very different from all the others is that, throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*, goodness ultimately overcomes evil, but as we approach the end, no matter how hard the faithful fight, it appears that darkness is winning. Those who follow the impostor Aslan seem to be a few steps ahead of the others.

Goodness cannot keep up with all the evil expanding into every corner of the kingdom. Lies spread faster than the truth. Fear controls every aspect of life. Friends are divided from one another. Alliances are broken. And the real Aslan is nowhere to be found.

This fantasy tale surely sounds a little too real.

This book presents in a vivid and real way the question many of us ask ourselves whenever we witness our world collapsing right in front of our eyes: "Why isn't God doing something about this?"

Indeed, one of the most sincere and heartbreaking questions of our faith.

And I'll be honest with you: I don't know the answer to that question. But perhaps what follows can help us make some sense of this great question.

After the chaos and deception of the false Aslan, the true Aslan finally appears at the end of the story. What follows is not a final battle, but the closing of an age, the turning of an era.

Salvation does not come as it has before in previous books. In fact, we might even argue that salvation never comes.

All that is left for these characters is to witness Narnia's demise and accept the fate given to them. They must run away and watch everything they loved turn to ashes.

Here is how Lewis describes the end of old Narnia:

- Father Time awakens and blows a great horn.
- The stars fall from the sky.
- The sun and moon are extinguished.
- Giants extinguish the sun like a candle.
- Dragons and great creatures sweep across the land.
- Seas rise.
- All living creatures must come before Aslan.
- Narnia grows dark and empty.
- Finally, Aslan commands Father Time to close the door, and the world ends.

And then comes the final scene.

The children pass through what appears to be the end of Narnia only to discover something shocking: the world they loved was only a shadow of something far more real and far more beautiful.

Lewis describes the new country as deeper, brighter, larger, and more alive than the old one. Mountains seem higher. Colors seem richer. Everything is in great harmony and peace. And as the characters begin running farther into this renewed world, they realize there is always more ahead of them. More joy. More beauty. More life.

It almost sounds like they found a place like Texas, where everything is bigger and brighter!

And that is when they begin crying out to one another:
“Further up and further in!”

One of the most famous and powerful phrases from the Chronicles of Narnia.

This doesn't feel like the end of a story, does it?

That's the point.

A story like this will never end because God will never let pain, suffering, violence, divisions, hatred, selfishness, power, and grief have the final word.

God's story is as alive today as ever because God's love is as real and powerful as ever.

That is exactly what Matthew and Luke are trying to tell us in their endings.

Jesus ascends, yes — but he does not disappear.

God does not leave us all alone. God does not abandon us.

Christ takes up his rightful place in heaven, but the Holy Spirit remains with us.

The story closes one chapter only so another can begin.

Luke ends with the disciples standing between heaven and earth, blessing God with joy as they wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Matthew ends with Jesus sending fearful and imperfect disciples into the world with one final promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Hear that again, friends.

Always.

Which means, at least to me and I hope to you, too, that when our world feels like old Narnia — when lies seem louder than truth, when hatred seems stronger than love, when cruelty spreads faster than compassion, when divisions deepen, when God seems silent — the ending has not yet arrived.

We are still called to be part of this story.

Yes. We are still part of this story because the Holy Spirit is still moving through us.

Your participation in this story matters.

Do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

And one day, by the grace of God, we too will discover that every beautiful thing we have known in this life was only the beginning.

On that day, with saints and strangers, with prophets and disciples, with all creation made new, perhaps we too will find ourselves running deeper into the goodness of God, crying out together: **"Further up and further in."**

Remember: The best endings are not real endings at all.

Amen.