

September 21, 2022
Text: Isaiah 25:6-9

Funeral of Lonnie Briggs

Dear family of Lonnie, friends of Lonnie, and brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Throughout the Bible, mountains are very significant. You might remember names like Mount Sinai, Mount Ararat, the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives, the Mountain of Transfiguration. God often descends to meet with His people on the mountains, speaking with them, inviting them into His presence.

We heard in our reading from Isaiah that “on this mountain,” the Lord would swallow up death, forever. Mountains are significant.

In Lonnie’s life, mountains were significant; one of his favorite places to go, somewhere to do many of the activities he loved to do, and especially somewhere to spend time with those He loved and cared for.

I was privileged to hear some of the wonderful memories that were made with Lonnie up on the mountain. And this last Thursday, the Lord Jesus called Lonnie to come be with Him... from on the mountain.

The story of Scripture, the story of humanity, the story of Lonnie – and all of us – can be tied to the mountains.

Perhaps we should start with the most pressing issue at hand, the reason why we are all gathered here this morning: our dear brother, and husband, and father, and grandfather, and uncle, and friend Lonnie has died. Why? Why did this have to be?

To answer that, we go to a mountain, Mount Sinai. Upon this mountain, the Lord God descended in glory and splendor, the Most High coming down out of heaven to meet with His people, whom He had just delivered from slavery in Egypt.

Now He comes to give them His Law, to tell them how they are to live as His chosen people. He doesn’t give them this to burden them, or because He’s mean or vindictive or doesn’t want them to have fun. No, in His Law, such as the Ten Commandments, God is revealing Himself to His people.

You shall not steal, because all things are from the hand of God and ultimately belong to Him. You shall not give false testimony – tell lies – because God is truth. You shall not murder, because God is the author and upholder of life. You shall have no other gods, because there are no other gods in existence.

God gives these Commandments to His people, and to all, to show us His holiness, and so that we might reflect this holiness as His people to the world.

In contrast to God’s holiness, though, all of us are unholy. When God descends on Mount Sinai, the people are terrified, pulling back, lest they die from touching the mountain. Indeed, sin cannot exist in the presence of the holy and perfect God.

And as the Bible tells us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and, “the wages of sin is death.” All people are sinners: you, me, Lonnie. Why did Lonnie die? Because he, like all of us, was a sinner.

Now you might not like hearing that. Humanity never has. It chafes against our pride to think that we can’t defeat death, that we don’t get to define right and wrong, that we can’t ascend to heaven on our own. We’ve been thinking this way for a long time.

That takes us to another mountain in history, or rather, mankind’s pathetic attempt at one: the Tower of Babel. Men looked around and saw the mountains reaching up into the heavens, but rather than appreciate their beauty and majesty and give praise to the God who made them, they said, “We can do that. In fact, we can do better.”

They figured that, because they knew how to make bricks and mortar, they could make a tower into heaven, climb up a mountain of their own making and speak to God as equals, attain heaven on their own. It didn’t work.

Now you might laugh at what a pathetic attempt it was, the lunacy of think that with enough bricks you could get to heaven and be like God. It is ridiculous. But that hasn’t stopped us from trying to accomplish the same thing, just using things other than bricks.

We think that, if we have enough money, we’ll ascend to the heaven of financial stability and be like God, having power and happiness.

We think that, if we have enough friends and relationships, know enough people, be liked by enough people, we’ll climb the mountain of society and be like God, on top of humanity, looked up to by everyone.

We think that, if we remember to take care of number one, just take the steps to do what makes us happy, then we’ll on top of the world, on cloud nine, no one holding us down – just like God.

Just like bricks and mortar, neither money nor relationships nor happiness nor self-fulfillment nor involvement nor any of the hundreds of other idols out there can form a mountain for us that reaches into heaven.

For one, the mountains we build are always collapsing, falling apart, being torn down. For another, none of those mountains can keep us from escaping our own mortality. The richest, “happiest,” most popular, most well-liked, most involved people still die. You will die.

Whatever you think might elevate you to be like God, or be your own god, or make it so you don’t need God, it will fail. There is only one heaven, only one God who dwells there, and as He said in our reading from John, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This is a humbling realization, coming face-to-face with our own mortality, and the mortality of our loved ones. But before our eyes become downcast, our God invites us to look up, to another mountain. This mountain is that of Golgotha – Mount Calvary.

There, God did what He promised He’d do through the prophet Isaiah. There, God who had taken on our flesh suffered our fate. There, the Creator was put to death for the sins of His creation.

The earth shook and the sky went dark as the innocent, pure Lamb of God took into Himself the sins of the whole world, washing them away with the blood He shed. On that mountain, God did swallow up death, that covering cast over all peoples and spread over all nations.

On that day, on that mountain, all of Lonnie's sins were paid for. Every Commandment he ever broke, every wrong thing he ever did, every time he failed to do the right thing, all of it was atoned for by the cross of Jesus.

Because of Jesus and what He did on Mount Calvary, Lonnie may have died, and yet now, even right now, Lonnie is alive.

Being clothed with Christ's own righteousness in Holy Baptism, being joined to Christ's death and resurrection, Lonnie now stands in the presence of Jesus. By the faith poured into Lonnie's heart by the Holy Spirit through the Word, Lonnie now dwells in that place which His Savior had prepared for him.

The Lord has taken away his reproach, wiped every tear from his eyes, and given him rest and peace that will never end. Lonnie now rests with all the saints in the presence of God, waiting for that day when the Lord will return and call him and all the dead from their graves, gathering all believers together with Him.

The love Jesus poured forth on Mount Calvary overcomes the fear of Mount Sinai, and because of that love, all who believe and are baptized with join Him on yet another mountain.

That mountain, Mount Zion, is one of the names the Scriptures give of that place where God dwells with His people. It is the hope and promise given for Lonnie and for all people.

The Lord desires to have all people dwell with Him in paradise forever. He died so that we might never have to say goodbye permanently, but that we might be reunited with all our loved ones, gathered around that wonderful feast of His victory. He desires this for each and every one of you.

So don't try to build your own mountain or find your way up on your own. You can't. And as Lonnie might tell us when we see him again, don't think that the Lord will come for you when you're expecting it, because more than like, it'll be an unexpected call.

Rather, trust in the Lord Jesus, who went to the cross for you, for me, for all men... for Lonnie. Believe on the One who has gone ahead to prepare a place for each one of you, a place where Lonnie now is.

Through faith in Jesus, you can join Lonnie and all the saints in heaven, rejoicing on that Mountain of the Lord and saying, "This is the Lord, we have waited for Him; let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

In the name of Jesus, amen.