

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Mountaintop Moments of Grace
Luke 9
February 27, 2022
Transfiguration Sunday

Today's readings lead us to contemplate the event of the Transfiguration in which Jesus allows the disciples Peter, James, and John a foretaste of the glory of the resurrection: a glimpse of heaven on earth. Something like this does not come along every day. In the normal course of human life, there are good days and hard days; times when God seems so real and so close and other times when God seems so very far removed. Every Christian worth their salt has had to work out their faith in a God who says I am with you always to the end of the age, but is not prodigal with glimpses of heaven.

Here is one of them. They go up the mountain with Jesus, they see him immersed in prayer and then see 'the appearance of his face changed.' Accustomed to seeing him daily in the familiar appearance of his humanity, they are astonished as they face the new splendor, new to them anyway, that envelops his entire body. Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus. Moses is the symbol of the Law of God and deliverance from bondage to slavery; Elijah the symbol of the Prophets and God's kingdom come by way of truth and grace, not by powers and principalities. Moses and Elijah appear and speak with Jesus about his departure, literally, his *exodus*, the suffering, death, and resurrection and the deliverance offered to God's people through his cross. It is a preview of Easter's resurrection glory.

Peter exclaims, "Master, it is good that we are here!" He wished that moment of grace would never end. Peter has been chastised for this for so long, for saying "It's good that we are here, let us make three tabernacles, or huts, one for you, for Moses, for Elijah." Luke adds his own commentary—*Peter said this not knowing what he said*. In other words, He didn't know what was saying. And truly he didn't. How could he?

Who could be prepared for such a moment as this? It's not like Jesus said to them that morning, "Guys, let's go to the Mount of Transfiguration," you know, the place where transfigurations happen. It's not like there was a place to go to when you're ready to be transfigured. And it's not like there's a Transfiguration Day your calendar, not then anyway. My point is that for Peter, James, and John, representing all of us, there was no category for this kind of theophany.

They'd read about theophanies: physical manifestations of God, but, you know, like normal people, they don't really expect to have one. You don't really expect on a given day to have one. They knew the old story of the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses, but who expects to encounter a burning bush, or see Jesus light up like a bush burning but not consumed? Or see Moses, for that matter. They knew the story of the pillar of fire leading Israel through the wilderness, but who expects to see Jesus shine like a pillar of fire?

Apparently, when this happens to you, you blurt out: “Hey,uh, I’ll build you a little house, each you, you each get your own. It’s good that we’re here.” Peter has been chastised for the hubris of saying, it’s good that we’re here, including seemingly himself and his partners in the glory of this theophany. He should’ve just kept quiet. Even a voice from heaven says, “This is my son listen to him,” which at least in part might be understood to be saying, “hush for once. just listen.”

Peter’s also been chastised for the absurdity of his suggestion—what exactly did he think a little house was going to accomplish for the disembodied spirits of Moses and Elijah and Jesus glowing like a lightbulb with divine light? Did they need a little house? Were these to be like little churches? Possibly. Christians do this, you know, construct chapels and churches anywhere there’s a whiff of sacred space. There’s a church over the place where the burning bush was supposed to have burned at the base of Mt. Sinai and another one at the top. There’s one over the rock on which Abraham was said to almost sacrifice Isaac. And one over the place where Jesus might have been crucified and buried, and another one over the cave where he was born. There are churches over the bones of the Apostles. In Assisi, there’s a church built to house another church.

In Peter already we see the hubris and absurdity that is said to characterize Christians who follow after him. The most common criticism of Peter, and Christians who follow after him, is that he thought the Gospel was a mountain top experience. That’s the phrase we use to describe those moments in life when God seems so very near, and we feel so very enveloped in God’s grace and love or so overcome with awe at God’s goodness. Often, not always, these are emotional experiences. So, the problem is that Peter wanted to stay there, on the mountain and wanted to ensure Jesus would stay there with him. But Jesus and the Gospel aren’t staying on the mountain top. Jesus is headed back down to the valley, to the place of suffering, and fear, failure, and grief. He’s headed back down there; that’s where the people are, and that’s the way to Jerusalem.

Truly, this is an important part of this story. The Gospel doesn’t stop here in Luke chapter 9 with the ultimate mountain top experience. It’s not hard to imagine how a very fine religion could be started from just those 9 chapters, if it stopped there. A God-man is born with signs in the night sky and visitors from the east. He grows, teaches, preaches, heals, embodies a new way of being in the world; he demonstrates supernatural power. And now he goes up a holy mountain where his key followers get to see him in all his glory. He stays there on the mountain while they head back down to tell everyone about the new demi-god they should revere at the base of this holy mountain. The transfiguration would be the final act in the dramatic arc toward his eternal glory. All’s well that ends well.

But this, of course, is not at all how the story goes. Jesus does not stay on the mountain. The Gospel does not stay up there elevated away from human need and suffering, sickness and war. The good news comes down the mountain to the level plain; goodness flows down the

mountain into the valley. The light shines in all manner of human darkness--the darkness we find ourselves plunged into, and the darkness we humans plunge one another into.

So, Peter . . . Peter, Peter. Peter, it is said, represents here the way of Christianity that with hubris thinks they are as important as Jesus, in absurdity wants to build monuments to nostalgically freeze the past, and wants to stay comfortably removed from human suffering, up on the mountain, away from the actual lives people are experiencing down in the valley, like the father in the story whose son is ill and tormented. "I beg you, look at my son." Is Peter deaf to those cries in his pride? Is Peter blind to that suffering? All of that's been said about him.

I gotta tell you, I don't think so anymore. Maybe I used to. Maybe I used to nod my head at the criticisms thrown at Peter here. Maybe I've even preached it, mocking Peter for what he said and what he proposes to do.

But now, I don't know, I'm sympathetic to him. I don't think he was blind or deaf to the world around him, and his life from here on out will demonstrate that in so many ways even unto his own death as a martyr. I don't think he was trying to contain Jesus in a little box. He'd already seen enough of Jesus by this point to have no illusion he could contain or control him.

I see someone who has been given a moment of grace in life, and knows enough to know those don't come around all the time, and doesn't want it to end. Why would he be in a rush for it to end?

Moments of grace like this are rare. Hold on to them as long as you can.

Moments of light are precious in times of darkness. Stay in the light as long as you can.

Moments of tender embrace end. Cling tight as long as you can.

When I dropped a young child off at camp or an older child at college, I wanted the last hug to linger, just because I knew they would go. When I had sabbatical and stood transfixed by the Pacific Ocean, I wanted to embrace the moment just because I knew it would pass. When I tasted the bites of food I would remember in detail as the greatest meal of my life, I didn't even want to swallow, because I wanted it to last. When I truly had a spiritual mountain top experience as a young person and felt myself totally overcome with the presence and love of God, I wanted it to last forever. Maybe then I thought it would.

But moments of grace don't last forever. They just don't, those glimpses into eternity. But we need them. Twentieth century theologian Karl Rahner believed this to be true about us---fundamentally true--that faith was woven through with experience of divine mystery. He could've been thinking about Peter when he said, "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all".¹ No one hardly confused Peter the fisherman with being a mystic, but even he had his moment of grace. And he needed it.

¹ Quoted in Bernard McGinn, "The Future of Past Spiritual Traditions," *Spiritus*, Vol. 15, No. 1, p 1

The transfiguration occurs at a precise moment in Christ's mission, just when they needed it the most. Just after he has confided to Peter and the others that he would have to suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised. Jesus knows they cannot accept this reality; they hardly have the imagination for it—the scandal of his passion and death on the Cross. These two stories back-to-back in Luke's gospel—the revelation of future suffering on the cross and the foretaste of resurrection glory—constitute a major Christ event in the life of the disciples. Another word for that is epiphany.

On this last Sunday in Epiphany, let us recall and renew our gratitude for major Christ events in our lives—those moments on mountaintop or lonely valley, in church rooms, or hospital rooms, or ocean side, or under the vast expanse of sky—when Christ's light, embrace, joy, hope enveloped you. And remember how, though you certainly have since then, you didn't ever want to leave. Remember how, though certainly it did, you didn't want it to end. You wanted it to go on and on.

Or maybe you're still hoping for an experience like that. Mystical experiences are not guaranteed, even to mystics, empaths, or contemplatives. Then again, mountaintop experiences, as profound as they may be, are not the goal of Christian life. All the great contemplative teachers teach this over and over, the life of prayer is not chasing an experience of God. It is openness to God in whatever comes—light or darkness, abundance or scarcity, peace or war, mountaintop or valley.

Faithful people have gone much of their lives without 'feeling' God's presence. So, if you have, even once in your life, ever felt yourself overcome with divine love and light, give thanks to God. Even if you couldn't hold that moment, hold that memory. It can sustain you through the darkest nights of the soul, and the driest wilderness of faith; and will give you strength as you carry your cross, as you follow in the steps of your Lord, as you are transformed from glory to glory, the mercy of God accompanying you each step of the way. You will not lose heart.