

Transfiguration

How do we relate to these two stories we read this morning? Have you had experiences like this? Seeing the glory of God... radiant light that is blinding.

In our Exodus reading, Moses descends from Mt. Sinai after spending forty days and nights with God. During this time, God established a covenant with Israel and wrote the Ten Commandments with Moses. In verse 29, Moses comes down from the mountain with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. His face was radiant because he was immersed in God's glory.

People were both amazed and terrified. We are told they were afraid to approach Moses. So, Moses began wearing a veil but only used it when he was with the people. The veil was meant for those who were afraid to look upon the glory of God radiating from Moses.

Peter, James, and John also witnessed the glory in Luke 9. Earlier in chapter 9, the twelve were sent out with the power and authority of Jesus in 9:2 to preach the Kingdom of God and heal the sick. You can say that Jesus' ministry had officially begun and thrived with him sending out his disciples with his power and authority, leaving figures like Herod greatly troubled because many started to say that Jesus was John the Baptist returned to life, Elijah, or one of the prophets from long ago. Another crucial point to remember is that just before he came up to the mountain to pray, Jesus began discussing his death with his disciples. In verse 22, Jesus said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law; he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life."

One commentator on this passage says that the transfiguration story is a pivotal moment in the gospel. In it, Jesus and his divinity are revealed to the three eyewitnesses. Elijah and Moses then meet with Jesus to discuss His Exodus and the fulfillment of God's salvation. All of this occurs as Jesus approaches his death. Therefore, the beginning of the journey to the cross.

Luke tells us Jesus went up to the mountains to pray. As he was praying, his appearance and clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. In Matthew (17:2), it says his face shone like the Sun. Peter, James, and John were sleeping again as they were on the mt. Olive, Gethsemane, on the last days of Jesus before he was arrested and died. Soon, they were awakened from their sleep and became fully awake when they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him.

Many of us are like Peter; we would not know what to say, only responding by saying we would build an altar with three shelters, one for each. Similarly, monasteries and temples were built to commemorate this sacred event so people could gather in a particular area where God had appeared. Peter must have expressed these thoughts because the event was so significant.

Witnessing Jesus, full of glory and standing with the two radiant beings, was already extraordinary. But then a cloud, which often symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit, appeared and enveloped them, causing fear as they entered it. Following this, a voice emerged from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

The voice was obviously the voice of God, echoing the story of Jesus' baptism, where the Spirit of God descended on Jesus, saying, "This is my son, whom I have chosen, listen to him. (It appears in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, and Luke 3:22.) Once again, it testifies that Jesus is the Son of God.

And mysteriously, all these ceased, the cloud lifted, and Jesus was found by himself. These things left the three disciples speechless. They were too afraid to speak about them until later, and this may have found it hard to explain to anyone.

Babara Brown Taylor said,
Jesus might have learned it on the mountain when light burst through all his seams and showed him what he was made of. It was something he never forgot. If we have been allowed to intrude on that moment, someone

thought we might need a dose of glory, too, to get us through the night. Some people are lucky enough to witness it for themselves, although, like Peter, James, and John, very few of them will talk about it later.

Similarly, we all have our personal encounters with the transfiguration story, our own mountaintop experiences, which can be difficult to articulate. Those of us who frequently hike in the nation's mountains and hills may find ourselves transported by this narrative to moments spent in the highest ranges, surrounded by the magnificence of creation. We experience the serenity of deep, calm, and even mystical places that evoke our sense of wonder, stillness, and peace. However, sometimes these experiences occur not in the mountains; they can happen on a beach or in bustling streets. We can encounter mountaintop moments anywhere—those fleeting instances when we sense God's presence, times when we feel especially close to Him, or moments when we perceive Jesus in ways we've never envisioned before.

17th-century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist Blaise Pascal, who made numerous discoveries contributing to significant contemporary knowledge, is said to have found the greatest assurance in his experiences of faith. One night, in 1654, he had an experience during which he wrote... God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and scientists. Certainty, certainty, joy, peace. God of Jesus."

He copied the full account of his experience onto parchment and sewed it into the lining of his coat, where his servant found it nearly eight years later after his death. For Pascal, the greatest reality was not what he discovered in laboratory experiments but what he experienced in his communion with God through Jesus Christ.

In his book *God's Human Face*, Christoph Schönborn explains that **the ultimate purpose of the incarnation is revealed on the mountaintop. It reveals who Jesus is through an outward appearance resembling our own.** In his boundless love, he chose to become a creature without sacrificing his divinity. Thus, Jesus made himself visible in his divinity, which would otherwise remain invisible and entirely hidden. In this brief moment of breakthrough beyond the obscure veil of flesh on this mountain of transfiguration, **God's plan of salvation is revealed**—the new exodus—in which Christ converses with Moses and Elijah. Letting ourselves be guided by him on the way to the cross, we ourselves may be changed into his image from glory to ever great joy.

And lastly, and most importantly, as Henry Drummond, a Scottish theologian, said, God does not create mountains to be inhabited. God does not make mountaintops for us to dwell on. It is not God's desire for us to live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to gain a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below. But we don't reside there. We don't linger there. The streams begin in the uplands, but they quickly descend to nurture the valleys below. The streams start in the mountaintops but flow down to bring joy to the valleys below. We experience the valley of life, and we understand what happens the next day when coming down from the mountain. It is the real world and real life. After the Sundays of life, there are always Mondays. But God, no matter where we live, is there.

Easter is approaching, and for those of us who recognize it, the next forty days will be remembered as the season of Lent. During this time, we are invited to follow the story of Jesus as he journeys toward the cross, not out of a religious obligation but from a desire to remember and experience Christ through scripture once again. This transfiguration story is pivotal because Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior, is the almighty God of glory, light, and life woven into the fabric of life for us, sustaining us through our journeys, no matter where we are.

So may we be blessed with this, along with all our experiences of God, lead us to Christ, help us walk with Him, and transform us into His likeness.