

A Transformational Experience

2Kings 2:1-12 Luke 9:28-36

The context of this passage I'm about to read is important—particularly what comes right before: Jesus asks his followers, “Who do you say I am?” As mentioned last week, this is the question that lingers throughout the New Testament: Who is Jesus? And Jesus himself now asks that question, “Who do you say I am?” to which Peter replies “You are the Christ.” Then Jesus tells them, for the first time, that when they get to Jerusalem, he will be handed over to the authorities to undergo suffering, be killed, and then rise on the third day. Peter doesn't like this and he lets Jesus know it (“God forbid it, this will never happen to you...” he says)—perhaps out of true concern for Jesus, or concern for his own comfort and safety (“if this happens to you it might happen to me, as your follower; we're supposed to be on a victory path here, not a path that leads to suffering and death”).

In response, Jesus tells Peter that he has his mind on the wrong things, and then he issues this call to discipleship: “If anyone wants to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me; for whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it.” Very eastern thinking! This is the beauty of paradox. We find our life by losing it.

After that conversation, here is where we pick up the story...

Luke 9:28-36

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

This is the word of the Lord.

Science teachers never tire, I'm told, of the moment when a student first looks into a microscope. What up until then had seemed like a boring speck of dirt, or perhaps an ordinary leaf, can suddenly become full of pattern, color, and living organisms. That child will never see things the same way again; everything now has more potential and interest than before. The same thing happens with a

telescope—when you see Saturn’s rings for the first time with your own eyes; or Jupiter’s moons, or *our* moon on a clear night, up close.

For Peter, James and John, what was up to then more or less ordinary, became extraordinary for a moment of time. A hike up a mountainside to pray, an ordinary experience with Jesus, became an extra-ordinary experience that made a deep impact. They will never see Jesus the same way again, and perhaps all of life won’t be seen the same way again. Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this account for us because they want us to share in this experience. In addition to that, Peter talks about this specific experience in one of his epistles (2Peter 1) so this event had special significance for him.

And as I approach this account with curiosity, I am drawn to the question: Why did this take place? What is the significance of this transfiguration as it’s called? I’d like to reflect on those questions, and while reflecting on them ask what this has to do with *our* faith.

So, why this event? What is the significance? Two things. Both of them having to do with solidifying and strengthening faith.

First, the appearance of Moses and Elijah solidify that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God had promised through the law and the prophets. At the very beginning of Jesus’ teaching ministry, at the beginning of what is called the

sermon on the mount (Matt.5-7) Jesus says these words, *“I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.”* Now, on the mount of transfiguration, Moses represents the law; Elijah represents the prophets, all of which point to Jesus as the promised Messiah and the fulfillment of what the law and the prophets intended. There is further significance to Moses and Elijah being there. We’ll get to that in a moment.

The appearance of these two towering Old Testament figures tells us that Jesus is the culmination of the centuries-long story of God’s redemptive plan and purposes. Jesus did not come to start a brand-new religion; he didn’t appear out of the blue and start teaching completely new material. He came to reveal the heart of what God had been purposing all along through the law and the prophets, and to complete them; to fulfill their intent.

Moses and the law got things started in shaping and forming a people who would be distinct and unique as God’s own people, from deliverance out of Egypt to the promised land. Elijah and the prophets carried things forward in working to remind God’s people who they were; mainly, that they were to be a light to the world, witnessing to God’s grace and love, and—to quote the prophet Micah—*“To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”* The prophet’s work was to continuously call them back to that identity and prepare the way for God’s

messiah. Btw, John the Baptist is last in the line of prophets who prepare the way. He just got to witness the coming of the messiah in person.

And so, the presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain confirm that Jesus had come to complete what the law and the prophets began.

It's interesting, Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus about his departure—which meant, his eventual death in Jerusalem as part of God's redemptive purpose. What's *that* conversation all about? Were they telling him something he didn't know? *"Hey, guess what? You're going to go to Jerusalem and be murdered by the authorities. Good luck!"* No. Just before this event, remember, Jesus had told his disciples that they were on their way to Jerusalem, and while there he would be handed over to be tortured and killed, and that he would rise on the third day. He already knew what was coming. So why did Moses and Elijah talk with him about this? Did he need a little boost of encouragement from them? I doubt it.

They spoke about it because this whole transfiguration experience *wasn't for Jesus' sake*. It was for Peter, James and John to see and overhear. Because they would, in due time, spread the word to the others. Not at first, though. Luke tells us that they told no one about it. Because, when people have unusual spiritual experiences like this, they are usually worried that if they say something,

others are going to think they've lost their minds. Or, they're just weird. But over time, as they process their experience and discover that it was transformative, and as they come to realize that they are not weird and haven't lost their mind, they're ready to talk about it. And, they'll discover that they aren't the only ones who have unusual and transformative experiences. It kind of normalizes the experience when others say, "I've experienced that too."

A little aside about this small group... because we may wonder, why did Jesus take only these three up the mountain? Peter, James and John represented Jesus' inner circle of leadership. This is the same small group that Jesus will take with him into the garden of Gethsemane, the night before his death, and ask them to wait and pray (where they also started falling asleep; I love it that they struggle to be faithful, like us). This is the small group that Jesus invited into the house to witness the raising of a Roman official's daughter. The gospel writers don't tell us why Jesus chose these three in particular, but it does show us the value of taking aside a smaller group for special instruction, prayer, leadership development, and... for significant experiences. Jesus saw something in these three that he wanted to build upon.

But these three disciples, because of their Jewish heritage, in seeing *Moses and Elijah in particular* on the mountain, would have known that of all the heroes

of their Jewish faith and heritage, Moses and Elijah were the *only two* that disappeared from view without having died in the normal way. Moses died, it tells us in Deuteronomy 34, but his body just seemed to disappear. There is no mention of a burial or of his bones being taken somewhere, or of anyone being with him at the time of death. Therefore, to this day, there are no shrines to Moses in the middle east, where his bones or burial site lay. In the Holy Land today we have David's tomb, Joseph's bones, Jacob's well, and so forth, but nothing for Moses. All it says was that he ascended mount Nebo because he knew it was his time, and he died.

And of course, we just heard about Elijah's spectacular departure. Swing low, sweet chariot, right?! Away he goes, and his body never returned.

So, not only are Moses and Elijah revealing of the continuity of old and new covenant that Jesus came to fulfill, in them is a foretaste of Jesus' departure as well. A little pre-resurrection, pre-ascension moment, a portent of the kind of departure that Jesus himself would experience. [And that we will also... the Bible tells us that "We will be like him in glory." Resurrection!]

So, the first significance of this experience is to show us that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and as part of that fulfillment, to give us a glimpse of what is to come in Jerusalem, and afterward—for Jesus, and for us.

This transfiguration is significant, second, because the disciples needed to have an “Oh my gosh!” “Holy cow!” *experience*, to encourage and solidify their growing faith that Jesus is who he says he is, and *who they just confessed him to be*. Because in all three gospels, again, if we go back just a few verses, Jesus asks all of the disciples the question: who do you say I am? And Peter, speaking on behalf of the group, says “You are the Christ; God’s messiah.” So, there is the verbal, intellectual confession if you will. But the intellectual confession isn’t enough. It isn’t enough.

Therefore, following that, this “holy cow!” experience, this mountaintop transfiguration, is needed. For their sakes. Again, it’s not for Jesus, it’s for the *disciples*, so their faith can be strengthened in who they just confessed Jesus is. And this strengthening happens in a couple ways on the mountain:

One, God glorifies Jesus in that moment. The brightness, the shining, is revealing his divinity, showing his glory. In this moment Jesus was *glorified* by God. And it was meant to inspire awe and wonder and faith. I don’t want to try to explain the brightness of the vision too much, because visions like this, when they happen, are simply to be taken in, and delighted in, and inspired by. If/when you have these kinds of mystical experiences, don’t overthink it. Rather than trying to figure it out, we just need to be in awe, and be encouraged by it.

This is a mystical moment. This is a thin place, or thin space. Have you heard that term before? It's a wonderful word picture. A thin space where the distance between heaven and earth, or as the ancient Celts would say, the membrane between this world and the otherworld, becomes thin. Or, we might say the veil is pulled aside for a moment, so we can be amazed and encouraged and strengthened. Sometimes it happens in a specific place, sometimes it's just an experience we are given as a gift, wherever we find ourselves.

This is spoke of in Celtic literature and lore, and we know it occasionally from our own experience. When you just have a sense of the divine, of God's glory breaking through in an unusual, extraordinary way. That's part of what's going on here, as Jesus takes them aside to have an experience that's out of the ordinary; it breaks the routine and gives them an awesome and adventurous moment of faith. Their faith is strengthened by the thin space experience, and by what they *see with their eyes*.

Their faith is strengthened, second, by what they *hear with their ears*, by *the voice* that comes from the cloud. These are the same words, *almost* identical to what was said at Jesus' baptism. Except, this time the words are spoken, not to Jesus directly, like they were at his baptism, but to Peter, James and John, who are witnessing this; with an extra instruction given: "This is my Son, my chosen;

listen to him!" Jesus heard these words addressed to him at his baptism to have his identity spoken over him, to strengthen him for what lies ahead (*"You are my son, my beloved"*). Now, these words are spoken again so that the *disciples* know, or have confirmed to them, who Jesus is, so *they* can be strengthened for what lies ahead.

Listen to how Peter himself explains this (2Peter 1:16-18): *"...for we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain."* Peter's next line is: *"So, we have the message more fully confirmed..."* There's the purpose: so we have the message more fully confirmed. This transfiguration experience helped confirm Peter's faith, and now he is encouraging the confirmation of faith in God's people.

In pulling this all together, I find in this transfiguration account an invitation to join Peter, James and John on the mountain. We all benefit from these kinds of experiences with Jesus—something out of the ordinary, something that grabs our attention and dazzles us, and lets us know that something more is happening—that what we normally see is not all there is.

We need “thin place” experiences like this to strengthen us and confirm our faith. And I think we need them today as much as ever! Amidst the clamor and noise of distraction and shiny objects calling for our attention, and the political rancor and the bombardment of our senses, we need to be invited to come away with Jesus, ‘up the mountain’ if you will, for an experience that strengthens us, and gives us a glimpse of a bigger picture—or a deeper picture—of who God is, which causes our jaw to drop occasionally. We need these occasional experiences, otherwise we get twisted in knots with everything that goes on, on a daily basis. And we need to be encouraged and strengthened for our journey, because life isn’t always easy, and we need to be reminded that God is real, that Jesus is real, and that he is with us.

And it can happen anywhere, anytime. On a mountainside (literally), in a church service, listening to beautiful music at home or on a walk, playing with your children or grandchildren, lying awake in the middle of the night, on a retreat (like we often have “mountaintop” experiences on retreats), working in your garden, while cooking food, or watching a good movie.

And they are experiences we are invited into... like Peter, James and John were *invited* to come along. They didn’t manufacture this experience; it was unexpected, and a little startling, but obviously welcomed. We can’t manufacture

these experiences, but it's good to be open to them, and receive them with joy. Because they are a gift, for our encouragement.

And when these gifts of thin space experiences are given—whether they are spectacular or subtle, big or small—as wonderful as they are when we experience them (and they are meant to be wonderful), we have to come down from the mountain eventually.

Peter, James and John had to come down from the mountain following their thin space moment. And eventually we have to come down from the mountain as well. Because when we have these experiences, even in small ways, we are often tempted to want to hang onto them. To stay up on the mountain, so to speak. Peter faces that temptation, as we heard.

Peter is so taken by this ecstatic experience, and by Moses and Elijah showing up, that he offers to build shelters for everyone. Let's call up HGTV and have them build tiny houses for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. That's his initial response. And given Peter's propensity for avoiding the difficult path ("suffering and death will never happen to you"), we can look at this bright idea that Peter has as a desire to stay, to remain in this exhilaration, in this moment of glory. Who wouldn't want to? What a wonderful experience! When I see a magnificent

sunset, I want that sunset to stay there for an hour or two. I want the cool bird I'm looking at to hang out and not fly away.

But, we must eventually come down from the mountain after heart-warming or spectacular visions and experiences. Back to reality! But we come down from the mountain changed, and encouraged.

After coming down from the mountain Jesus will again remind his disciples of why he came—two more times after this he will tell them of his upcoming suffering and death once they get to Jerusalem.

A few verses following this transfiguration account (9:51) Luke tells us that Jesus “resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It represents a turning point. We'll talk about that next Sunday.

And so, we climb the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus. We climb to share the vision that Peter and James and John beheld, and to be strengthened by it for our return, for the sake of serving others, and telling the story of our own experiences of transfiguration and transformation.

#193, Jesus Take Us to the Mountain