

Mountaintop Now

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Exodus 24:12-28, 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Matthew 17: 1-9

I have a friend who assiduously avoids preaching on this Sunday every year. Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before the beginning of the Lenten season, the Sunday that marks a most unfathomable moment in the earthly life of Jesus.

Transfiguration means, literally, a change of appearance. This morning's bulletin cover, so mindfully curated by Rebecca Thornburgh, shares one artist's attempt among many to capture what happened. The three so-called synoptic gospels, "synoptic," meaning read together because of their similarity – Matthew, Mark, Luke – all carry a version of the transfiguration.

In Matthew's version, which we receive this year, Jesus takes a handful of his disciples with him up a high mountain. We are not told why, nor were they, nor are we told whether Jesus anticipated what was about to happen. What happened was that his face changed, dramatically. It shone like the sun and his clothes dazzled.

Moses and Elijah – two towering figures from the tradition – appeared. They were talking, a kind of very high level committee meeting. The disciples were watching all of this, a kind of lower-level committee meeting. Peter was taken by the whole thing and suggested that they build three little buildings to house the three, a kind of misguided capital campaign proposal.

Before that could happen, or even be responded to, a voice boomed out – this was all happening at a dizzying and overwhelming pace and volume. A voice boomed out, similar to the voice that boomed out when Jesus was baptized – "this is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

The disciples were very, very afraid, kind of to the point of freaking out. Jesus reassured them – get up, do not be afraid. When they looked up from their cowering, all was back to normal. No dazzling appearances. No visitors from the tradition. No one except Jesus. They headed down the mountain. Jesus commanded them to keep quiet about all of this, a kind of divinely mandated non-disclosure agreement. Don't tell anyone until I have been raised from the dead. It is what the scholars call the "messianic secret."

There is so much going on here, so many entry points to this wild moment.

- The reading from the book of Exodus this morning foreshadows the transfiguration. Moses goes up the mountain and enters the cloud where he encounters God in anticipation of receiving the tablets containing the commandments.

- There is the quick succession of events itself. Jesus' face changing in appearance. His clothing changed. Clearly, then, as if it was not understood with certainty, his divinity was on full display.
- Then the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Most scholars understand this to represent the two aspects of the faith tradition – Moses is the symbol for the law and Elijah is the symbol for the prophets. What we follow and how we live.
- But before that point can be fully considered, a voice booms out, as if it was needed, a voice booming out from the cloud, presumably God's. The voice identifies who Jesus is, not only completing our understanding of fulfilling the law and the prophets, but God's son, God's beloved. And as such, we are to listen to him.

The reading from 2 Peter confirms the authority of all of this. Be attentive to this, pay attention, as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place.

In fact, this whole episode has lots of commands, imperatives. We are told to do stuff, or not do stuff. Listen to him. Get up. Do not be afraid. Tell no one.

Do not be afraid. Matthew tells us they were overcome by fear, as if the word "overcome" can come close to describing that level of fear.

Yet here we are – do not be afraid. The words Mary heard when the news of her pregnancy was revealed to her by the angel. The words other angels shared with the women at the tomb on Easter morning. Do not be afraid as a through-line in the narrative. An often easier-said-than-done encouragement, an acknowledgement of our own human response to big news or spectacular news or difficult news. Do not be afraid. What a parent says to a fearful child in the middle of the night, or a friend says to a friend when a doctor calls with a cancer diagnosis. Do not be afraid.

In fact, you might miss the subtle, not so subtle point in all this. It seems as if the disciples did. After he tells them not to be afraid, he implores them to keep all of this a secret. Tell no one, tell no one, until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. The seed has been planted, the seed of his coming death – this beloved one, worthy of attention, God's beloved, and more, the fulfillment of the law and prophets, whose very appearance had just been transformed. He will die, so this morning serves not only as a precursor of resurrection, it would seem to me, but a foreshadowing of the events that precede Easter morning, including his horrific death, which will be witnessed by the same group that went up the mountain with him.

And that mountain itself. Of all the entry points to the story this time around – the change in appearance, Moses and Elijah, the booming voice – of all the entry points, I am struck as much by the setting itself, and how it frames the whole episode. Up the mountain they go. Down the mountain they come. Up the mountain they go, for this spectacular, incomprehensible, pyrotechnic, fear-inducing, adjective-defying experience.

And down the mountain they come. Back to reality. Back to the daily, routine, quotidian moments of life. This episode is not about the disciples, except in a way it is. Their experience in watching all of this, in making sense of all of this, integrating this one moment into all of the moments of their lives. They will be with Jesus for a short while. Then he will be gone; they will remain. So while a mountain frames it all, going up and coming down, it is the coming down part that interests me in this moment.

When I was a youth, and I *was* a youth at some point, our church's youth groups would attend youth conferences, some on a local or regional scale, some on a grand, national scale. They were all great. Even the ones that weren't great were great. New friends. Late nights. Falling in love every 30 minutes. Engaging speakers. Energetic worship. And then we came back home, to the regular and routine. We'd beg our youth leaders to recreate that mountaintop conference experience.

Or even now, as an adult, either organizing or attending such events, with the rarefied air of heady theological discourse or edgy missional opportunities or charismatic presentations. And then you come back home, down the mountain. Back to the regular and routine.

Or if you are married, or were married. For many, the wedding day itself was that mountaintop experience, with all of the attendant wonderful-ness. We are in the midst of thinking about this ourselves, our family. It is all very exciting. But you know, if you have been in one, or witnessed one, that the strength of a good marriage is best understood the next day, and the day after, when the couple comes down the mountain, the guests gone, the fancy clothes packed away, the gifts opened.

The same can be true, in an odd way, at the time of death. A loved one dies, and the events take over, the whirlwind pace of planning, organizing, gathering. Whatever service happens, tears flowing, long embraces exchanged, eloquent words expressed. It is not until the next day that the real grieving begins, the adrenalin spent, the ceremonies complete. I'll not soon forget the image of my father, the day after my mom's funeral. Now it is time to mourn.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of mountaintop experiences. His reflection was less of Jesus and the transfiguration, and more of Moses looking into the promised land. Yet he knew; he understood. At a poignant, powerful gathering in Memphis on April 3, 1968, King said this: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." The next day, he was gunned down by an assassin's bullet.

King knew, however, that the real work of the civil rights movement happened not in the big and grand gatherings, the packed sanctuaries, the huge rallies, even the marches. Those were important; they mattered. What mattered more, and allowed those big, mountaintop moments to happen, was all that happened in between. The small group meetings. The phone calls. The letter writing. The mimeographing. The one-to-one conversations that energized and inspired and cajoled and convinced and carried the movement forward.

Any strong relationship – a marriage or friendship – is based not on mountaintop experiences, but on what happens when you come down the mountain. The small conversations. The thoughtful give and take. The every-day decisions that reflect values and perspectives.

I am watching the events in Wilmore, Kentucky, at a small Wesleyan school called Asbury University, with some interest right now. Perhaps you have read about a revival that has taken over the campus and that has garnered national attention. Continual, emotional, round-the-clock worship by students and faculty and others. Lines half a mile long waiting to get into the auditorium. Deeply emotional experiences, moving experiences. I am interested as a student of American religion, who served a congregation in Rochester that had been served by Charles Finney, the great evangelist of the early 1800's. And I am interested as a leader and practitioner of the faith.

What happens when we come down from the mountain? 2000 years ago? In Wilmore, Kentucky? In Memphis, Tennessee? In Chestnut Hill? Come down the mountain from whatever grand experience we've had in order to live the faith day by day, in order that allow that experience to permeate all of our life, our relationships, our attitudes, the way we spend our time or our money.

The grand experiences matter – transfiguration matters. But they matter only in as much as they matter when we come down the mountain, to live in the day-to-day realities of life. To seek justice on the local scale. To love daily, in the regular and routine. To not be afraid, period, even when fear seems like the most logical response.

We listen to Jesus, and follow where he leads us, go where he calls us. Like those earliest disciples, we will not get it most of the time, and many times we will get it wrong.

Nonetheless, because Jesus invites us up the mountain with him, and accompanies us when we come down, we can trust that he journeys with us, even now, encouraging, empowering, allaying fear, present in the small acts of faith, that, added with all the others, will make a difference, a transforming, even transfiguring difference. Amen.