

# **Transfiguring the mountain**

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February 10, 2013 (Transfiguration day)

Luke 9:28-43

Alleluia! God be with you. And also with you.

What a wild story this is — Jesus in dazzling white, an appearance by Moses and Elijah, a voice from heaven. Can you get any closer to God? The story of the transfiguration of Jesus on that mountain is a literal “mountain top experience.” There are other mountain top experiences in the Bible: Moses receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and of course that great “sermon on the mount” that Jesus preaches in Matthew.

“Mountain top experience” is code for “God is near.” We often associate a deep happiness with the mountain top, happiness too deep even for words. All is right with the world and everything is in perfect harmony. Most of the time mountain top experiences occur on figurative mountains though there are some among us, the rock climbers and hikers, who know the thrill of the top.

As a congregation we had a mountain top experience recently. Or maybe it was just me. But after years and then months of waiting, dreaming, planning, hoping and wondering, we finally rejoiced at our return to this renewed building. What a celebration — the church packed out, the food overflowing, generosity and gratitude and gift giving. But you can't stay on the mountain top forever; you have to come back down to the real world. And with the untimely death of our friend Charlie, we had some of the “real” world with us, even on the mountain.

In the text from Luke, Peter, James and John head to the mountain with Jesus. They have recently heard some hard teachings from Jesus about who he is and what it means to be his disciple. To be a follower means taking up the cross, losing your life, living without shame about this man Jesus. Now eight days after these intense conversations, they are heading to the mountain where they will get a different view of things.

I am curious about this reference to “eight days later.” It must have some significance. This is a humble guess on my part, but I wonder with all the talk of death, losing your life and carrying your cross, if the disciples decided to “sit shiva” with Jesus. This Jewish tradition is observed after a death, when people come to sit with the bereaved family for seven days. “Shiva” means seven in Hebrew. Life slows down and there is a time to mourn. On the eighth day, the family resumes normal life again. Often the family takes a walk to signal to others that the time of mourning is over.<sup>1</sup>

The disciples and Jesus take their walk to the top of the mountain. Jesus does as he often does; he enters a time of prayer. But that hike must have been a rough one because Peter, James and John fall asleep. When they wake from their exhaustion they see Jesus praying, all radiant and glowing with light, and he is talking with Moses and Elijah.

They are all there: Jesus, the law and the prophets. It is a scene to hold onto. Such power and history and glory all together. Peter immediately has a brainstorm — they can erect some tents right there, one for Elijah, one for Moses and one for Jesus. They can stay together and this glorious moment will be preserved.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kaddishbands.com/sitting-shiva-tradition-and-rules/>

But at the mere suggestion of holding on to and protecting the moment, they are enveloped in a cloud and they all hear a voice. "This is my Own, my Chosen. Listen to him."

Then it is over. Moses and Elijah are gone, the cloud dissipates, Jesus is just himself again. No more razzle dazzle. And as so often happens with the disciples, they are not really sure what to make of this or what to say. So they don't say anything to anyone.

Back to the top of the mountain, where things are so ... amazing. Words seem inadequate but it is as if the whole creation is vibrating at the same frequency. There is such unity. The magnificence allows you to see things in a new light, to understand and be understood. The world is transformed, and you feel transfigured yourself. You are at one with the world.

The problem with mountain top experiences, as Jesus and the disciples learn very quickly, is that they do not last.

The next day, after this mysterious, astounding closeness with God and Jesus, the group goes back down the mountain. And wouldn't you know, they are right back in the thick of the crowds and needy people. Right away, a distraught father comes to plead for healing for his son. Apparently while Jesus, Peter, James and John were experiencing the glory of the mountain top the man had asked the other disciples to heal the child. But they couldn't do it.

Hearing this, Jesus is impatient with the disciples. He calls them faithless and perverse. Or maybe he is talking to the whole crowd, frustrated with the whole situation, the continuing misinterpretation of who he is and what that means.

It seems like a very human response for Jesus. He has just had discussions with Elijah and Moses. He heard God's voice affirm him and call him God's Chosen. And now, a few short hours later, he is greeted by the desperation he knows all too well. These are the same hassles that drove him up the mountain to pray in the first place. But Jesus does what he has done so often before and will do again; he rebukes evil, heals the son and restores the child to his family. The people gathered are astounded, perhaps speechless, at God's greatness.

The response of the crowd makes me wonder if this experience, one that seems to annoy Jesus, is actually a mountain top experience for the people who witness it.

Two weeks ago we had a high moment of worship and eating together, of hospitality, of living into the beauty of this building. And then it was over. It was as if we had been worshipping and working, singing and praying together, like Buddhist monks at work on a sand painting, a mandala. Each person contributes to the color and pattern, to the collective beauty and like with the chanting monks making art, the energy that emerges from this collective work moves out from the circle and is felt by others.

And then like the mountain top, like an unforgettable musical experience or a sand painting, it is all gone. The Buddhist monks sweep away the sand and scatter it in flowing water, an act that represents the "transitory nature of material existence."<sup>2</sup>

As followers of Jesus, we understand that there is something beyond what we can see, but we also know that God is here among us, that there can be blessing in this material existence, in these bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/aroundthemall/2010/03/the-spiritual-power-of-sand-art/#ixzz2KQEU6Ohr>

Each Advent season we watch and wait for signs that God is coming again. At Christmas, we proclaim that it is true; God has come again and is right here among us. In these days before Lent, when we observe Mardi Gras traditions which inevitably involve the body in eating and drinking and dancing, we again affirm that though these bodies may be temporary; God is alive and at work.

On Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate that God is present and at work on mountain tops and in the flat lands. After all, Jesus came back down the mountain. He was present with the frantic father; he lent his power when the puzzled disciples could not. Through Jesus, God was present to people gathered in pain and in joy.

As followers of this Jesus, we make the audacious claim that the same is true today. God is present with us on the mountain tops and the rocky outcroppings and the plains and the canyons. Jesus' incarnation means that the whole of our lives are holy, not just the happy parts.

This is a great mystery.

Today is another mountain top experience as we celebrate with Michelle and Becky their legal wedding. Weddings, like other mountain experiences, end and then the real work of marriage begins: the joyful, daily life of commuting, working, keeping house, keeping lines of communication open, laughing, loving and the commitment to lifelong love.

It is this commitment, this covenant that we make in marriage and with each other in the church, that leads us as we come down the mountain. It is our belief and hope that God is among us, that the holy weaves her way through our lives drawing us closer to each other and to Herself.

Transfiguration need not only happen on mountains. God can come among us anywhere. But like the disciples who were sleepy after their hike to the mountain, we might have our eyes closed to the glory that is right in front of us.

And it can be fleeting. We cannot capture this wild God in a tent.

But we can stay present to the moment, eyes and hearts and minds open to the ways that even we can be part of helping spread the joy and healing of God's presence in the world. May it be so.