

The Summit Summons
Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration of the Lord/ 23 February 2020

Mountains fascinate us and they humble us. They call us and summon us. There was a time when people were afraid of mountains. They were the forbidding abodes of dragons and other mysterious beasts, the dwelling place of the gods. Something began to shift in the mid-1700s in Europe as people became fascinated by the sublime, drawn to climb higher and higher summits, inspired to conquer imposing heights.¹

In the Bible mountains are mysterious and holy, they're places of encounter. God said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there..." (Ex. 24:12). Covered by a cloud, the glory of God lit up the sky, and Moses dwelled there, waiting for the tablets of the Law. Jesus, too, knew the mountain was the place of encounter and revelation. Jesus summoned Peter, James, and John to go with him up to "a high mountain" (Mt. 17:1).

Both of these texts remind us that there are places *where* and moments *when* everything comes into focus, when everything becomes perfectly clear. There are moments of searing insight and brilliance, moments that change everything. I once was blind, but now I see—and see, and see, and see and nothing, no one will ever again look the same.

We thought we knew who Jesus was. We thought we had him figured out. On this holy mountain we come to see who he really is. Witnessing his transfiguration transfigures our false figurations of him, transfigures our assumptions, transfigures our eyes and thoughts, our ears and our hearts. The core of his being emanates through the radiance of his face, which "shone like the sun" (Mt. 17:2), his appearance dazzling like flame with the intensity of pure, white, blinding light. Peter, James, and John watch in disbelief. Moses (representing the Law or Torah) and Elijah (representing the prophets) appear and the three of them begin to talk. Peter tells Jesus that he's grateful to witness such a sight and, in a spirit of hospitality, offers to provide a dwelling for them, booths or tents or something. He doesn't make much sense. Even Peter probably didn't understand what he was saying. Peter is always quick with his mouth. It doesn't matter, because, Matthew tells us—*while* Peter was still speaking—a "bright cloud overshadowed them," and a voice was heard,

"This is my Son,
my Beloved;
with him I am well pleased:
listen to him!" (Mt. 17:5).

It's the force of the voice and the weight of its revelation that threw Peter, James, and John down to the ground, overcome by fear. But Jesus approached them—was he still shining?—leaned down and touched them, touched them—in their fear!—and said, "Get up!" "Get up and do not be afraid."

And they were afraid. I would be afraid. Wouldn't you be? Time and again, the natural response to an encounter with the glory of God, to be overcome or overshadowed by God's presence, is fear. Yes, we can call it holy fear or awe, if it makes you feel better, but it's still an overpowering emotional response. It's, perhaps, more like ego-shock. It's an encounter, an awareness of someone completely, wholly Other, an overwhelming Other in whose presence we have no right to stand, and so we fall, fall down under this "weight of glory," as C. S. Lewis (1889-1963) beautifully described it. We fall down on our knees and cover our faces before the Holy of Holies.²

So, yes, there's a rational reason for us to be afraid. It can be an *awe*-full, fearful thing when God moves in our lives. This is probably why we often run from God or resist prayer or worship or being silent or listening to our hearts. We can run. We can remain busy, get distracted. But there's no place to hide. "Where can I go from your spirit?" asked the psalmist, "Or where can I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

Fear and trembling are involved because encountering God inevitably costs us something—its requires something of us, namely control over our lives. When Christ is the center our lives, our egos, preferring to be at the center of everything, are knocked off dead center. And, we have to admit, as Moses knew, as well as Jesus and the disciples, when you get mixed up with this God you discover there's more going *around* you and *in* you, even *beyond* you in the world, more than you can possibly begin to imagine, more than what meets the eye—which is why our sight always requires transfiguration in order to really see.

And it's fearful for the ego because this God might actually show up in our lives and make an appearance; ask you to do something that's simply too big for you to do; summon you to become someone you know you can't be on your own; call you to change your ways; ask you to go somewhere you would rather not go, which doesn't appear safe; embark on a journey that you're reluctant to take, to cross the threshold from the familiar out into the unknown. To encounter God means that our lives will change; they will be different—and not only different, better!

All of this requires change. Transformation. The Greek word, which we translate, "transfiguration" is a form of the verb *metamorphoo*, as in *metamorphosis*. So we can say that Jesus was *metamorphosized*. If we're not changed by the encounter or the experience—if we're not being changed by the encounter or the experience—then it's probably safe to say we're not encountering the Holy. As my friend Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said, "Once you wise up, you can't dummy down." Change is inevitable.

And after encountering the presence of God in the face of Jesus Christ, how can you ever go back to normalcy? What is normal after that?

We all want to be normal. But, if we're honest, being normal, along with being safe or secure, has little, if anything, to do with being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus never said, "Follow me and I will make you normal." The account of the Transfiguration, the lectionary reading for the last Sunday at the edge of Lent, intentionally reminds us what it means to be a disciple, a student in the school of Jesus, a follower of Jesus Christ. The transfiguration is

situated at the center of Matthew's Gospel, echoing the words that Jesus heard at his baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17), and foreshadowing what Jesus will experience in his resurrection as the beloved Son of God. The story comes on the heels of Jesus's words to his disciples, "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28)—as Peter, James, and John came to see six days later. So, yes, there's good reason to be fearful about all of this talk about discipleship and crosses and tasting death.

But Jesus doesn't leave us there. "Get Up! Do not fear!" Fear, holy fear and awe are part of the experience, but fear is never the ultimate reality for the disciple. Time and again throughout scripture, God calls us to live *beyond* fear or *through* the fear. And here's the tricky part. Being a disciple is difficult; it isn't easy. It requires courage. In Marilynne Robinson's beautiful and profound novel, *Gilead*, the main character, the Reverend John Ames, at the end of his ministry and his life, reflects on the nature of God and what's required of us in the life of faith. John Ames says, "...the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?"³

How do we get the courage to step out and live as if God is really God, that Christ is Lord of our lives? How do we find the courage to listen to him?

In the midst of their fear, Jesus went over to his disciples, his friends, and in their fear and trepidation, reached out, reached down to them and said, "Get up!" Literally, in Greek, "Be raised!" "Rise up." "Get up and do not be afraid." Fear not. Get up and follow, free from paralyzing fear, because the Beloved One, Love Incarnate, has touched you and assures you that you can. Get up and follow, beyond the tight confines of fear because his grace summons you to do so. And the one who commands also equips us with the courage to follow. Get up and do not be afraid because it's the Lord who tells us so—and he can be trusted.

The truth is this: we can't afford to remain stuck in our fears because there's work to be done. You can't stay up on that mountain. You can't get lost in lofty spiritual experiences. The summit summons and then it sends us. The dazzling vision will subside. Go down the mountain, get back to work, back to family, back to your children, back to your neighbors, back to responsibility, back to being a disciple, get back to "normal"—the new normal in a life transfigured by this ongoing presence. Once you have seen you cannot unsee. And what you now see is God's enduring work of saving and redeeming, transfiguring and transforming human lives. There's an entire world that needs to know and experience God's saving and loving! And you know what God desires of you and for you—you really do. You know God's will. It's God's plan from the start. It's about God's justice, it's about naming evil and fighting against it, it's God's Kingdom-vision of suffering love and compassion and mercy and healing and peace and welcome, the very things that Jesus came to embody and realize in you and me.

God said, "Listen to him."

Jesus says to us, “Get up! Don’t be afraid!”
And he says to us, “Now, let’s go. You and me, together. There’s work to be done!”

¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit* (Vintage Books, 2004).

² C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” a sermon preached at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 8 June 1942, published in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2001).

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004), 245.