

Transfiguration C 2025. Luke 9:28-36

There's no shortage of bad news lately, but I've been particularly heartbroken by the attacks on our National Parks. So I did what you do when you feel like there's nothing you *can* do: I made a donation, and then I re-watched for probably the third or fourth time Ken Burns' documentary series on the National Parks. I was reminded that one of the most influential advocates for that preservation, John Muir, was the son of a Presbyterian preacher who required him to memorize the majority of the Bible when he was young. You can hear his religious upbringing in the way he spoke and wrote about nature; the mountains were for him, cathedrals, and visiting them was a spiritual experience. Muir is not unique in encountering God's presence as much in the mountains as in church on Sunday morning. Even as a Sunday morning church person, I tend to agree with him. But wherever we experience the Divine, within or outside of explicitly religious practices, our mountaintop spiritual experiences help us understand the Transfiguration, and the Transfiguration helps us understand our own spirituality. Most of us have probably not seen Jesus, glowing, deep in conversation with two people who have been dead for centuries; but we very well may have echoed Peter's words—*Lord, it is good for us to be here*—only to be called back down to the valley much sooner than we'd wish.

We lose a bit of the context coming into the gospel in the middle, but eight days earlier, as Luke plots the timeline, Jesus fed the multitudes, predicted his crucifixion, and asked the disciples who the crowds and who they thought he was. Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but the rumors were that Jesus was Elijah or one of the other prophets come back to life. Here, Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, as if to prove that he's not either one of them, although I can't explain how Peter, James, and John recognized Moses and Elijah. They also see the appearance of Jesus' face change, which was the same thing that happened to Moses when he was in the presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai. Luke editorializes a little and says that Peter offers to build shelters for them because he did not know what he was saying. But one could argue that Peter knew exactly what he was saying: in the Old Testament, when Moses and Elijah had their mountaintop experiences, they each stayed up there for 40 days and 40 nights. Peter's offer is logical; if mountaintop visits with God usually take 40 days, maybe they'd like somewhere comfortable to sit.

However, the voice from heaven interrupts, and like the revelation at Jesus' baptism, announces that Jesus is the Son, the Chosen one. This time the voice is directed not to Jesus but to the disciples, instructing them to listen to Jesus. If they listen to the conversation Jesus is

having with Moses and Elijah, they'll hear him talking about his upcoming departure, that is, his death; Jesus keeps trying to tell the disciples that his work will lead him to the cross, yet they're perpetually surprised by that news. Peter is correct in saying it is good for them to be there—otherwise Jesus wouldn't have brought them along; but they aren't meant to stay. Jesus has to head back down this mountain to make his way to another mountain, Calvary. Instead of spending 40 days in the bright and shiny presence of the heavenly prophets, Jesus has work to do amongst living people in the valley, 40 days we observe as the season of Lent. Put a mental bookmark at this place in the story, however, because you'll hear some very similar details when we get to the other end of Lent: here Peter, James, and John, though weighed down with sleep, wake right up and eagerly suggest staying with Jesus in his glory on the mountain. But when Jesus takes these same three disciples with him to the garden of Gethsemane, and asks them to stay with him while he prays before his Passion, they can't manage to stay awake.

The wow-factor of this story is the transfigured appearance of Jesus and the supernatural return of the greatest of the Old Testament's prophets. In one way, this story calls us to simply stand in awe of God and *listen*—not even to understand, since the mystery of God can't be fully understood. But this story also shows us something much less flashy: human nature wants bright, shiny, exciting, triumphant experiences of the divine...yet, like Peter, James, and John, we're less enthusiastic when we get to dark, difficult, or even just mundane seasons of faith. We want the bright shiny Jesus on this mountain top; we need the Jesus who prayed so fervently in the valley that his sweat fell like drops of blood—the Jesus whose glory was revealed not when he was lifted up in splendor between Moses and Elijah, but when he was lifted up on the cross between two criminals.

Not only do we want the triumphant Jesus instead of the Jesus who calls us to the hard work of selfless love, or as we say, the theology of glory instead of the theology of the cross, but we mistake mountaintops as the best examples of God's presence with us, and valleys as the times when we are mostly on our own. Although it may be easier to perceive the presence of God up on the mountains, the literal or figurative ones, God has promised to be present with us everywhere. When Peter said, "Master, it is good for us to be here" that was true, but it was not the location or the circumstances that made it good for them to be there: it was the presence of the Lord. And since Jesus was still with them when they went back down the mountain, they were still in the presence of the Lord; it was good for them to be down there, too. Up on the mountain, in the light, or down in the valley of the shadow of death...God is there.