

Transfiguration Sunday

The liturgical calendar gives us a glimpse and experience of glory before reminding us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, and this Wednesday – Ash Wednesday – marks the beginning of Lent. Our Ash Wednesday service starts at 6:30. Lent is a season where we try our very hardest to do as God commands, to truly listen and do what Jesus said as we follow Him to the cross. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 9:28-36. **Read Luke 9:28-36.**

Jesus has invited Peter, James, and John to go up the mountain with Him for one of His prayer times. We know from the Gospels that Jesus regularly went away to pray. Often the disciples had to go looking for Him, but this time He has invited His inner circle to come along with Him. Just a little over a week earlier, Jesus talked to His disciples about what was to come. That conversation ended with these words: “Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God,” (Luke 9:26-27).

I can’t help but wonder if the Transfiguration was part of that promise. We’re told, “As He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning,” (Luke 9:29). The word that’s translated as “changed,” or “transfigured” in some translations comes from a the Greek word which we usually hear most frequently in Science, *metamorphosis*. When you think in terms of Science, and hear that word, what do you think of?

Metamorphosis

It makes me think of ugly caterpillars transforming into beautiful butterflies. The same word is used in Romans 12:2, where Paul urges believers to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The mountaintop, then, is a place of transformation – a place where change happens. There are other mountaintop experiences recorded in Scripture.

We heard one earlier today. Moses ascended Mount Sinai, spoke with God, and received the Ten Commandments. When he came down, his face shone so brightly that the Israelites were afraid to look at him, so he had to wear a veil. Another Bible story, 1 Kings 19, records a time when Elijah met God on Mount Horeb, where he experienced the presence of God not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a still small voice.

Now, Jesus stands on the mountain, transformed in glory, and He's joined by Moses and Elijah – representing the Law and the Prophets. Their presence testifies that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant. Luke records that Peter, James, and John were sleepy – much like they were in the Garden on the night Jesus was betrayed. Seeing Jesus in all His glory, along with the two heroes of the faith, really wakes up the disciples.

Peter's overwhelmed. He wants to stay on the mountaintop. "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," (Luke 9:33). Peter's reaction is natural. When we experience God's presence, we want to stay there. But transformation isn't meant to be an escape – it's meant to equip us for what's coming next.

Stuck on the Mountaintop

I've known people who get "stuck" on the mountaintop. They have powerful encounters with God, maybe in a worship service, a time of prayer, or at a retreat – and these are real experiences – but they aren't the destination. He gives them to us to prepare us for what comes after. "Moses and Elijah appeared in glorious splendor talking with Jesus. They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem," (verses 30-31).

I want to point a couple things out here. Moses and Elijah had lived thousands of years earlier at this point. They had been dead a long time. But there they are, "in glorious splendor." They were living, breathing human beings on the mountaintop talking to Jesus. When we have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, these bodies, even though they return to the dust, we don't die. We are alive, with Him, "in glorious splendor." The other notable thing which Luke mentioned is that Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus about His "departure." The original Greek word is *exodos*, meaning exodus – it's a reference to the deliverance of God's people from Egypt.

Exodus

Moses led the first exodus, delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. Jesus accomplishes a greater exodus – not from physical bondage, but from bondage to sin and death. Elijah was also associated with a dramatic departure. At the end of his life, he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2), and foreshadows the ascension of Christ. Jesus leads the greatest exodus. The exodus of God's people who by faith accept what He did for them at the cross, by His dying in our place to sin and death, and bringing us into the promised land of a new life and as citizens of God's kingdom. He sets us free and allows us to truly live!

And this is where things start getting really interesting. Peter wants to stay up on the mountain. And while he's talking about this, a cloud covers the mountaintop, and the disciples become afraid. "A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son,

whom I have chosen; listen to Him,” (verse 35). See, Jesus knows He has to descend, because His mission is down in the valley. Jesus already knew He was going to suffer and die – He had already told His disciples about it. But they didn’t understand. They wanted the glory without the cross. So the Father steps in, and sets things right.

Jesus’ mission was to bring freedom – salvation – not comfort. Are we willing to follow Him, even when it means we have to suffer? We can’t just sit back and admire Jesus’ glory – we have to walk in His footsteps. And so, when we have the mountaintop experiences, we have to come down from the mountain, and engage with life in the valley, too. That’s where the real work is.

Called to Come Down and Work in the Valleys

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered one of his most famous speeches. In his speech, he talked about the struggles of the Civil Rights movement. He talked specifically about the struggles against perceptions. He talked about dreams. But this wasn’t his “I Have a Dream” speech. This speech talked about the realities of 1968, and in this speech, Dr. King talks about how we, as Christians, sometimes get caught up – we get stuck – in our own mountaintop experiences.

It’s all right to talk about “long white robes over yonder,” in all its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It’s all right to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and His children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.¹

See friends, what Martin Luther King was echoing was what Jesus intended when He led Peter, James, and John down from the mountaintop. Jesus was telling His disciples – not through words, but through actions – that staying on the mountaintop might seem like a good idea, short-term. But the problem is, it doesn’t accomplish anything for God’s kingdom. We’re called to make an impact on the people we encounter. Listen to how Dr. King finished his speech. He said:

I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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

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Martin Luther King, Jr., *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*, April 3, 1968, last accessed 2/28/2025, at: <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

Promised Land! And so 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!!²

The next morning, as he stood outside his hotel room, a shot rang out, and Dr. King was dead – killed by an assassin's bullet. King's words say more about the Transfiguration experience, and more eloquently, than what I could do. Throughout our lives, we climb the mountain with Jesus over and over. We experience the near presence of God in our lives, over and over. Sometimes, we miss the moment because we're distracted – asleep at the switch like Peter, James, and John started out in the story. And other times, our experience with God hits us right smack dab in the middle of our foreheads – and we're changed, forever.

God wants us to do something with that experience. He wants us to hold onto it, but also to come down from the mountaintop and use it to help other people. The Father tells us today, "This is My Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him," and what is it that Jesus tells us to do? He tells us to "Go, make disciples," (Matt. 28:19). We do that, both in what we say and what we do.

Prayer: Lord of the Mountaintop, God of dazzling clothes, Be with us when we come down from the height of worship to face a world that didn't see what we just saw in You. Show us what to do. When demons rage through schools, let it not be said that Your disciples could not cast the devil out. When violence threatens to engulf our communities, let it not be said that Your disciples cowered in fear or walked on the other side of the road. When there is peril or fire or flood, let it not be said that Your disciples cleared the unwanted junk from their garages and called it charity. Lord of the Mountaintop, God of dazzling clothes, Show us how to be. Change us; transfigure us, so that this world might see what we have just seen, and worship only You. Amen.