

*Matthew 17:1-9*

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. <sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”*

*2 Peter 1:16, 19*

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of His majesty... You will do well to be attentive to this, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

To be honest, sometimes I find it hard to read the Bible. I can analyze it; I can write sermons about it. But I often catch myself reading it like a tourist—noticing something, taking a snapshot, but always looking for the *next* “photo op”. Then there are times—and this is one of them—when the Scriptures stop me in my tracks.

The Transfiguration story is always the focus on the Sunday before Lent begins, but this year, I see it in a new light. When I read what the apostle Peter wrote about the Transfiguration, in 2 Peter 1 (verses 16 & 19), I imagine him looking back on his life. It hadn’t been easy, and there were times Peter probably wanted to forget—like his behavior in our text today. So why does Peter point to it as a defining moment in his life?

I suspect it wasn’t just seeing Jesus bathed in light; rather, it may have been hearing the voice of God, stopping him in his tracks. It’s a vivid story. If we’d been there, I suspect it would have made quite an impression. It almost begs us to turn our imaginations loose, to paint the picture. But Peter almost missed it.

The accounts in the Gospels say that Jesus’ appearance changes right before their eyes. Imagine seeing Jesus in bright “*white*.” In the desert they didn’t see white very often; everything took on the beige cast of the soil. But their *real* excitement was seeing Moses, the Law-Giver who led the Israelites out of slavery; and Elijah the great prophet who, we’re told, never died. In Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah would appear just as history was about to end. Had the story ended there, all would be well: Moses, Elijah, and the Son of God, together on the mountain.

But Peter spoils the whole thing. He interrupts Moses, Elijah, and the Son of God! “Uh excuse me, Jesus... This is really amazing; I mean, wow—Moses and Elijah! You know these guys? Here’s what we should do: it’s cold up here; looks like it could

rain—why don't we make three shelters, so you can relax and talk more comfortably: one for you, of course; one for *Moses*, and one for *Elijah*! And could I get their autographs?"

God interrupts Peter's blabbering: "*This is my Son. Hear Him!*" *Moses and Elijah aren't the celebrities. Peter: all this time you've been in the presence of my Son. Shut up and listen. Get your priorities straight.*

Then the scene ends. Moses and Elijah disappear; it's just them and Jesus. They leave the mountain and return to the valley, and the journey toward Jerusalem.

Jesus tells them not to talk about "*the vision*." So—was it only a vision? Did it really happen? Was Jesus expecting a "transfiguration"? How did the disciples know who Moses and Elijah were? Why *them*? And why just Peter, James, and John? What was Peter trying to say? Why did Jesus tell them to tell no one about it—and why did the Gospel writers tell everyone about it anyway? And simply: Why did this happen?

There are theories about all those questions, but Matthew doesn't speculate. There is no obvious link between this event and what happened before or after. It stands by itself, and we are left to wonder.

So for us, standing at the entrance to Lent, Good Friday, and Easter: what do we do with this story? What's the "takeaway"?

Peter wanted to build a monument. We want to explain everything that happens to us (or at least, take a picture). We want to explain our experiences: this happened because...the meaning of this is... And we think that if we've figured it out, we can build a little shelter for God in our minds, where we expect God will stay.

That's why we need Lent. Living by faith is more improvised than scripted; walking with Christ is a walk with an occasionally strange God who knows the way, but doesn't have to explain it. You and I are called to follow Jesus. Mountaintops of joy and valleys of hard service—and occasionally, encounters we can't explain—are part of the package. Life is measured not by how much we know, but by the wisdom that makes us who we are. Faith is a life-long journey, a process of growing into the likeness of Jesus. But it is marked by occasional transfigurations, glimpses of more, that make us new. True faith often means shutting up, sitting still, and listening.

Lent's a perfect time for stillness and listening. From Ash Wednesday through Good Friday, we have, if we accept it, the gift of slowing the pace, and paying attention.

Late in life, Peter writes his letter. And now we know at least some of his answer to the "why" of the Transfiguration. "*...we had been eyewitnesses of His majesty...*" *I know I can trust the mysterious One who called me to follow, because I heard God's own voice.* We didn't hear what he heard, but we can learn:

...that life doesn't come with instant replay, where we can go back and re-live what we missed while we were distracted or preoccupied.

...But life does come with wonderful gifts; occasionally, God gives us glimpses of glory, a peek behind the scenes, insights into God at work. "*You will do well to be*

*attentive to this, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*” They may be only glimpses, but they keep us alert—reminding us that what God does has a life of its own.

...And they teach us that the true potential of our life is defined by the God on the Mountain, and the Jesus who on that day shone like the sun.