

“What Goes Up, Must Come Down”



“Transfiguration II” by Jan Richardson

Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing,
Open to us your life-giving word,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit
so that living water may flow out of our hearts—
a spring of hope for our thirsty souls and our thirsty world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSVue)

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ 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."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "What Goes Up, Must Come Down"

As a kid, I loved the Wizard of Oz. I was also terrified by the Wicked Witch and the flying monkeys. Remember the scene where Dorothy, the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion encounter the "real" wizard? The giant screen shows a powerful, larger-than-life person with a booming voice that rings out across Emerald City. But then Toto pulls back the curtain, and everyone finds that the wizard is just a man. It's just smoke and mirrors. His cry of "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" falls on deaf ears. When the curtain is pulled back, he is seen for what he is.

In our reading today, the curtain is pulled back and someone is seen for who he is, too. Unlike the wizard of Oz, though, this person is far more than just a man. Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John and "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." These three apostles saw the curtain pulled back for Jesus and they were awed by his glory and power. It was so great they fell to the ground in fear. Pulling back the curtain showed just who Jesus is. He was so much more than they thought he was.

There's a reason Matthew adds the specific time "after six days" they went to the mountain. Six days was the necessary time to prepare for a holy event for the Jewish people. Six days of creation prepared for the day of rest. Moses waited with Joshua for 6 days on Mt. Sinai before God revealed the 10 Commandments. So here, something amazing is about to happen on this mountain—the time of waiting and preparation is over. The sixth day is here.

There's something spiritual about mountains. I never get tired of looking at the mountains that surround us in Tucson. Mountains remind us of the things from above. Too often we see only what's in front of us, not above us. Stars and mountains help us look up. Mountains change our perspective. They are places of revelation. We talk of mountaintop experiences. Crucial moments in Jesus' life happened on mountains:

- Jesus was tempted by the devil and resisted him on a high mountain.
- Jesus gave his most famous sermon on a mountain—the Sermon on the Mount.
- Christ's crucifixion was on Golgotha—the Hill of the Skull.
- His ascension took place on a mountain.

Jesus loved the mountains. So Jesus, Peter, James, and John went to a high mountain retreat — by themselves to be alone. And there Jesus was transfigured before the three disciples, His face shining like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

Moses' face also glowed when he encountered God on Mt. Sinai—he had to wear a shroud when he went down to the people.

You see, we're never the same after encountering God. God accepts us as we are but loves us too much to leave us as we are. The heart of the gospel is transformation.



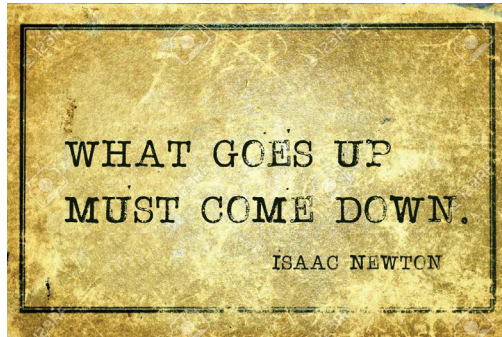
In fact, the Greek word translated as “transfigured” in the NRSV is “metamorphosis” which in English means can you guess?... metamorphosis. “Meta” means *change*; “morphis” means *form*. But the metamorphosis of Jesus is not a change in form, shape, or substance. What we see in the transfiguration is the revelation of who Jesus was all along. They were given new eyes to see who Jesus really is!

There is no shortage of epiphanies in this world. We just need to have eyes that see, ears that hear. Every bush is a burning bush. We need to pray that God would help us to notice, to be more attuned to, more aware of God's presence in our lives and world.

But Jesus wasn't the only one there. Elijah and Moses miraculously appeared. There's been a lot of speculation why it was these two. Tradition says that both men were taken to heaven—Elijah on the chariot of fire and Moses with a kiss from God. Both figures had mountaintop revelation experiences. Moses represented the Law and Elijah the Prophets. Elijah was likened to John the Baptist as a forerunner to the Messiah. Moses was told there would be another prophet like him—whom we believe is Jesus the Messiah.

Peter responded to this amazing scene in his typical style—he speaks up, even if he has no idea what to say. “Let's make three dwellings, three tabernacles as memorials.” One commentator noted, “It never occurred to Peter NOT to say anything.” I thank God for Peter and his hastiness. I mean isn't it comforting? And Jesus still hung out with him and built the church upon him! There's hope for us yet. Peter wanted to fix that transfiguring, mountaintop moment in stone—to memorialize it for all time.

We have that Peter tendency, too—where we grab those special moments and enshrine them. Instead of enjoying the butterfly in action, we capture it, put a needle through it and label it and hang it on the wall. We have this habit of worshipping the experience, rather than the God of the experience.



We can't forget this scientific law, which is also a spiritual law: **What goes up, must come down.** It's a good thing to "go up" to a great experience with God, but we will become greatly disillusioned if we do not remember that eventually we have to "come down" again. We can't stay on the mountain forever.

But then we read that while Peter was still talking, a bright cloud overshadowed them. Clouds are mysterious like mountaintops. They reveal and simultaneously conceal. Clouds symbolize the manifestation of God's presence. A booming voice from the cloud overpowers Peter's voice. Then, just like at Jesus' baptism, God's voice thunders—this is my Son, the Beloved in whom I am well pleased—listen to him!

"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Listen to him. This is about Jesus—all the law and the prophets, Moses, and Elijah, testify to him. *Listen to him!* The voice didn't say listen to *them*—to Moses, Elijah, or Peter, James, or John. Rather, listen to him—my Son. Jesus not only ranks with the other prophets—but is distinguished from them. God doesn't even say listen to *me*. Rather listen to him. To listen to Jesus, is to listen to the Father.

This is one of the most important things we can ever do: *Listen to him!* And when Jesus taught his parables, he said something similar: *Let the one who has ears to hear listen.* And in Jewish thought, true listening involved not just hearing, but believing and obeying. Jesus is God's Word made flesh—watch, listen, believe, and obey him.

God also uses the plural—*you all* listen to him. We need the community of believers. We need the church, each other, to hear Jesus loud and clear. We've got to listen to Jesus, and listen to Jesus with others, like we're doing now—and go out from the church into the world to share the good news with those who haven't heard or seen Jesus—to invite them to listen to Jesus together with us in church.

We point to him, not ourselves. Jesus went up the mountain, but he wasn't afraid to come back down to what was awaiting him—to heal, to serve, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. Come down with him—bring your mountaintop experiences into your everyday valleys. Be with Christ not only in glory, but in the trenches, in the suffering, the hard times, in the carrying our cross, and dying to ourselves.

Then Moses and Elijah disappeared—their job was done. Jesus alone approached and touched the disciples and lifted them up when they had fallen down. When they lifted up their eyes, they only saw Jesus. “Get up and do not be afraid.” With Jesus, what goes down before him, is lifted up by him. “Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up.” We’ve got to get up. Jesus has a job, a mission waiting for him and us in the valley. There’s more work to be done. The cross, the crucifixion, Golgotha, is one stop on the way, but it’s not the end of the journey. We’re not left with Christ disfigured and abandoned and bloody on the cross. There’s more to the story—the risen Christ, who is glimpsed at here in the Transfiguration. Jesus’ destiny is our destiny, too. We too will be transfigured—shining like the sun. We need to hold together both Christ’s suffering and Christ’s glory. His bright white garments symbolized not only his majesty, but also the martyrdom he would endure on the cross. Even the symbol of the cross was transformed by Christ—once a symbol of death, a brutal form of capital punishment—was transfigured by Christ into a symbol of life—good triumphing over evil.

There’s a story of a young soldier on the Western front during the first world war, in the hell of the trenches, with shells exploding all around him. He became surrounded by the piled-up bodies of his fallen friends, and he turns to a comrade and says, ‘*We weren’t meant for this*’. All around us this side of heaven, we see very different visions of people and things that are *disfigured*, rather than *transfigured*—by natural disasters, earthquakes, wars, poverty, and oppression. And we say with transfigured vision, “*No, we were not meant for this. No, this is not what we have been created to be. Christ came to raise us from this.*” Maybe it was this thought that motivated Jesus to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to feed the hungry, to befriend the leper. To everything and everyone disfigured by disease or disability or injustice, Jesus says we were not meant for this! After things went back to “normal,” Jesus swore the three to secrecy—don’t tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, then you’re free to talk.

Crucifixion and death isn’t the last word. Transfiguration is the last word. It’s the foreshadowing of resurrection. Christ arose on the third day. The tomb is empty. Life, everlasting life, is the last word in our lives and in the universe.

This vision of hope helps us to make a difference in Christ’s name.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *Transfiguration II*, Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com>

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.