



**“What Happened on That Mountain?”**  
**Scripture – Luke 9:28-36**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, March 3, 2019**

A couple set their wedding date twelve months out. Over the next year the bride and groom spent hours planning for their special day. Okay, in reality it was the bride and her mother who spent their days deciding the details. Most men do not possess this spiritual gift!

The bride made a long list of details and began checking them off one by one – where to have the reception, the guest list, the flowers, the invitations, the bridal dress, the attendants’ dresses, the tuxes, the band, and every detail they could conjure up to make the wedding day unforgettable.

At first, it felt as if the wedding was an eternity away, but in the last three months they were frantic to make sure every detail dropped properly into place. Then, finally, the wedding day arrived.

The ceremony touched the hearts of everyone present because as they pledged their vows to each other the groom’s voice cracked and she whispered through her tears. The dinner was flawless; the reception was boisterous; it was a spirited and perfect night. As the hour became late the couple did not want this special day they had dreamt of to end. They wanted to hold onto the exhilarating moment as long as they could.

Can you remember a moment that you did not want to end? Can you think of an occasion that was special and you wished you could make it last longer? Perhaps you had a Thanksgiving when the family came together and it was so rich and beautiful you wanted it to last for days. Or, perhaps you traveled to a special place and you knew you could not stay there forever, but you wished you could stretch it out a little longer.

Hearing today’s Scripture reading about the transfiguration of Jesus, it sounds as if the disciples who accompanied him up the mountain may have felt that way. Peter even offered to build tents thinking that would help them hold onto the occasion as long as possible.

But, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Our text begins with these words: “Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.”

Wait a minute. What sayings? If we back up a few verses we hear that Jesus was curious about how others perceived him. He wanted the disciples to tell him what they were picking up from the word on the street. Jesus asked, “Who do they think I am?” The disciples offered up, “John the Baptist! Elijah! One of the ancient prophets!”

Jesus sharpened his focus and said, “But, who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter blurted out, “The Messiah of God.” Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone because he would be rejected and killed and on the third day raised. And he said that anyone who wanted to follow him would have to deny themselves, take up their own cross, and follow him. Jesus added: “For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake will save it.”

After setting their heads spinning on those words, Jesus began leading his disciples southward on a path that would take them to Jerusalem. On their way, they came to a mountain; tradition says it is Mount Tabor. Jesus started marching up the mountain to pray, and he had Peter, James, and John in tow.

If you were to take a spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you might go to the top of Mount Tabor, but I doubt you would walk it. Vans cart visitors up the mountain because although it is not tall, it is unusually steep. The vans buzz back and forth on countless switchbacks to scale its heights. Standing atop the mountain it is not hard to imagine fog rolling in and covering it.

Once Jesus and the three disciples reach the peak overlooking fertile plains, Jesus began to pray. This is where the text becomes intriguing. Some would say an enigma.

We read that “while Jesus is praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly (the disciples) saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him about what Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem.” How long did this conversation go on? The text gives us no clue. It was one of those intense moments when everyone loses track of time. But scripture says that when Moses and Elijah began to depart, Peter did not want it to end. Peter said to Jesus, “This is an amazing moment. Let’s build three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

While Peter was trying to convince Jesus of the wisdom of his idea, a cloud came and overshadowed them. The disciples were terrified as the cloud enveloped them. A voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Suddenly they see Jesus standing there alone. The text ends with these words: “The disciples kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

Of course they kept their mouths shut! Imagine Peter at a dinner party and he says to the person sitting next to him, “The other day three of us hiked up a mountain with Jesus and while we were there Moses, who had died 12 centuries earlier, and Elijah, who had been gone for nine centuries, appeared out of nowhere and carried on a conversation with our teacher. Furthermore, a large cloud blanketed us and God spoke to us.” You can see the person scooting his chair as far away from Peter as possible!

What happened on that mountain? The three disciples experienced something...strange. But also holy. Surely they struggled to make sense of it. As they lumbered back down the mountain, I can see the three shooting occasional wide-eyed glances at each other that said: What was that all about?

Perhaps they thought that once they reached the bottom of the mountain and were back on solid footing, Jesus would unpack the whole experience. There were earlier occasions when the disciples had not comprehended the meaning of a parable or some extraordinary event, and Jesus spelled it out for them. Maybe they thought Jesus would interpret what had happened on the mountain, once they rejoined the other disciples at the bottom.

Maybe that is what they were anticipating, but it never happened. Our text says they kept silent and told no one what they had seen. Perhaps they were in shock. Or, perhaps they held the whole episode in their back pockets hoping that in time they would grasp its meaning.

As I pondered preaching today's lectionary reading, I felt that I was being lured into demystifying it. As I attempted to dig down into its meaning for our lives, I was tempted to give my best shot at making perfect sense of it. But, I resisted.

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on the downwind side of the enlightenment, it is tempting to try to explain away everything mystical in rational terms. All of the scriptures were written more than a millennium before the scientific revolution and, in our arrogance, we believe we can analyze and quantify virtually everything in logical terms.

One way to demystify a passage such as the Transfiguration is to approach it as a purely metaphorical story - something contrived by its author. We can identify the various elements of the story and name what they represent. We can say, "The author has placed Moses in the scene to represent the law and he has written Elijah into the script to represent the tradition of the prophets. The writer has done this to declare that in Jesus we find the culmination of both the law and the prophets. Any questions?"

However, I wonder if sometimes we spend too much time trying to explain things that defy logical explanation. Theologian Bruce Epperly points out that most western Christians are skeptical "of non-rational experiences, despite the fact that Judaism, Christianity, and all the great religions of the world had their origins in mystical experiences."<sup>1</sup>

I think it helps from time to time to remind ourselves that there are experiences that defy rational explanation. Hear me right. I am not arguing in favor of taking all of the words of Scripture literally, but I am saying that we could use a good dose of humility when it comes to thinking we can explain every episode of our lives in logical terms.

We moderns rarely, if ever, have mystical experiences because we have disenchanted the world. We presume that every experience in life can be understood in terms of logic and reason. If we happen to experience something puzzling, something that defies rational explanation, we either dismiss it or we assume we just need more information before we can nail it down. But most people know in their soul that life includes more than we can understand and explain. Isn't that why people are attracted to music and poetry and our dream world? These mediums give us impressions that expand life beyond mere reason and logic.

You may have heard me say that Camilla and I were with her mother three days before she died when she peered through the thin veil to the other side and saw several of her loved ones. Her face glowed a white-gold like the nurse, Camilla and I had never seen.

Countless people have died on operating tables and been resuscitated only to share their glimpse of heaven while their soul soared beyond their body.

Some of you have told me that you were visited by a dear loved one after they died – something that seemed both real and unreal.

During worship, one of our members rivets her eyes on our Resurrection window. On more than one occasion, as she focuses on the white space behind Jesus, she sees her mother, her father, and her brother all safely in God's care. They appear happy and full of life. Is she merely imagining what she sees, or is she seeing with the eyes of her soul?

Could it be that, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "God's glory is pulsing just beneath the surface of things and every once in a while leaks in through some of the holes, bathing us and everything around us in a brilliant light

of transfiguring promise, Easter hope, and all-embracing divine presence...(or do) we live in a world where everything is flat and exactly as it seems, with no light, no holes, no fullness?"<sup>2</sup>

Divine light is not always dazzling;  
some say it never reveals anything new under the sun.  
But still I wonder what would happen  
if we slipped off the blinders strapped tightly around our skulls,  
restricting our view to what human reason declares possible.  
If we suspended our categories of what is logical and predictable  
would we be open to thin places and sacred spaces  
and the treasures they have to offer?  
If we were open to the possibility of something we cannot fully grasp,  
might we stumble onto holy ground where we would be awestruck?  
I wonder.

#### NOTES

1. Bruce Epperly, "Lectionary Commentary," *processandfaith.org*, February 10, 2013.
2. Shannon J. Kershner, "Memories," quoting Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p. 7, on February 15, 2015.

### **Great Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson** Adapted from a prayer *Book of Common Worship*, 2018

Eternal God,  
God of our ancestors, of Moses and Elijah,  
you come to us in a whirlwind of mystery,  
a swirling tempest, a devouring fire.  
Yet you come to us —  
speaking faithfulness and mercy,  
shining light in our darkness,  
offering forgiveness for our sin.

We give you thanks for Jesus Christ,  
the light of the world —  
shining at the dawn of creation,  
shining in our hearts this day  
with a splendor that overshadows  
all the beauty of heaven and earth.  
In his face we have seen your glory;  
through his words we have heard your truth;  
by his living and dying and rising  
we have come to know  
the height and breadth and depth  
of your great love.

With thanksgiving we remember  
the bread of life —  
taken, blessed, broken, and given  
that we might be holy and whole.  
With thanksgiving we remember  
the cup of salvation —

your new covenant of grace,  
poured out in love for the world.

Remembering your faithfulness and mercy  
as we share this bread and cup,  
we offer ourselves in your service  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we gather at this table,  
pour out your Spirit upon us,  
and upon these gifts of bread and cup.  
Make us one people —  
one in the promises of Moses,  
one in the prophecy of Elijah,  
one in the body of Christ  
as we seek to proclaim the good news.  
Let our lives shine with Christ's light —  
a blessing of joy to the living,  
a beacon of hope to the dying,  
a sign of your new creation.

This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ,  
who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**