

As a lamp shining

About 25 years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Israel, courtesy of the Knights Templar, an organization of the Masons. One of the places we visited was Mt. Tabor, what is believed to be the scene of the transfiguration. It is a beautiful mountain, standing alone in a huge valley. All tourists, rather they arrive there by car or bus, must park at the bottom of the mountain in a large parking lot at the base of the mountain. The only transportation up and down the mountain was run by a group of local Bedouins, Muslims, with a fleet of large, white Mercedes Benz sedans. There is only one road, and winds back and forth, full of hairpin turns and sudden curves along the mountainside. The cars fly at breakneck speed on this road. I don't recall if we wore seatbelts, but I do recall that at every sharp curve, we passengers would slide one way and then the other on the smooth leather seats. There are always many of these cars traveling on this road, and the drivers would communicate with one another through walkie-talkies, in their native language of Arabic. It seems that they would alert each other where they were on the mountain, or what part of the road they are approaching, because every so often, the one car will move over to the extreme side of the narrow road, and suddenly, a Mercedes coming the other way would pass by.

The drivers do know a little English, however, at least enough to entertain the Christian pilgrims who are their passengers. Every time there was an especially sharp curve, or when we would narrowly miss a car moving in the opposite direction, the driver, one hand holding the walkie-talkie and the other hand on the wheel, would look back at us, smile, and say something like, "Hallelujah!" or "Praise the Lord, that was close!" When we arrived at the parking lot at the top of the

mountain, the driver brought the car to a sudden stop and smiled and shouted, "We made it, thank you Jesus!"

At the top of Mt. Tabor, there is a Franciscan Church, built on the remains of churches dating back to the 4th century. There is also a Greek Orthodox Monastery. The view from the mountain summit is inspiring, stretching out for miles in every direction. Growing up in Utah, I have always loved the mountains. Mountains have always been a place where my thoughts move toward God. While at Mt. Tabor, I did a lot of praying from in the back of the Mercedes, but I also found the church there, and the mountain itself to be a place of prayer.

Psalm 121 reads, "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." People in Biblical times must have felt this way about their mountains, too. Throughout the scriptures, mountains are frequently the places where people experience the presence of God.

It was on Mount Carmel where the prophet Elijah was put to the test by the false prophets of Baal, and Elijah called upon the Lord, who sent down fire from the heavens to consume the sacrifices that had been offered there. Later, when Elijah was at Mount Horeb, eagerly seeking the Lord, he experienced a ferocious wind that split the rocks, and then an earthquake, and then a great fire, and finally, he heard the sound of sheer silence on that mountain, and he knew that this was the presence of the Lord.

Moses, too, encountered the living God on the mountaintop. It was on Mount Sinai where he first came across the burning bush. The Lord told him this was holy ground. It was on the mountain that the Lord sent Moses to free the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Later, after they had been freed, Israel returned to Mount

Sinai, and there, Moses went up on the mountain and received the ten commandments from God, written on the stone tablets.

One day, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and together they went up on the mountain to pray; we believe this was Mount Tabor. While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Other gospels describe it was white as lightning. Suddenly the disciples saw two others with Jesus: Moses and Elijah. The presence of these two is significant. The Law is represented by Moses, who received the law, what Jews call the Torah, on the mountain. And the Prophets are represented in Elijah. Elijah, the one prophet who did not die, but was taken up into the heavens. The Jews hope that Elijah will come again. Here now, is Jesus, the Messiah; he is with the fulfillment of all that has been before – the law and the prophets. They appeared in glory, Luke writes, and were speaking of Jesus' departure, which he would accomplish at Jerusalem.

Although Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, they stayed awake for this, and they witnessed God's glory. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Another gospel writes that Peter uttered these words because he didn't know what to say. Peter wanted to hang on that moment, we wanted to put up some kind of marker or monument to mark the event. Later, Peter would realize you don't need a physical reminder, for such things, because it is something you carry in your heart, as a lamp shining. Peter came to know that this light will be with you even when you come down the mountain, even in times of darkness.

Suddenly a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified. Then from the cloud came the voice of God, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Listen to Jesus, God is proclaiming. This is really the gospel message: Listen to Jesus, witness

to who he is. He is the fullness of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus shows us the very heart of God. Jesus is showing you the fullness of God's love. Walk the path he is showing you. Live the way he is living, Follow him. That is what all disciples are called to do.

After the voice had spoken, when the cloud had dissipated, when Moses and Elijah were gone, there was Jesus alone. And that was all the disciples needed: Jesus. The disciples would travel down the mountain, but their hearts would keep a piece of the transfiguration with them, like a light shining within them. Over time, they would share that story among themselves and with the people around them.

I want to go back to the little phrase Peter said, when he turned to Jesus and said, "It is good for us to be here." The Greek word used is *kalos*. *Kalos* is the word for good, and it is the same word for beautiful. This is beautiful, this is good. He could have also said, this is holy. It may be difficult to put this into words, but down deep, we *know* when we have walked on holy ground, we *know* what we have seen and heard, and our heart tells us this is of God, and we can trust it.

These holy moments bring us joy and they somehow light us up inside. I think that is what the scriptures are suggesting when they describe the shining of Moses' face, or how the entire appearance of Jesus became dazzling white. The glory of God kind of "rubs off" on us. It brings a change not only in our thinking and feeling, and how we see. It enters our minds and hearts; it is something you can practically see in someone. Perhaps you have seen this in others. We talk about a person being all lit up inside. It happens when they are speaking of something they are passionate about, or when they are in love or immersed in something they truly love. We see it when a mother or father speak of their children. Love lights us up. The

Transfiguration shows us that the love of God, given in Jesus, given to us, lights us up. it lights up the whole world.

But we need to be willing to open our eyes and our heart when these moments come our way. And they may come when we are on the mountain tops, and also when we are walking in the valleys of our daily life. Even the dark valleys. Peter tells us, “Be attentive to this, nurture those moments, as a light shining in the darkness. It is the presence of God, like the dawning of a new day, like the Morning Star, Christ, rising in your hearts.”

You and I, we cannot make these moments happen, because they are from God and the Spirit blows where it will. All we can do is to be open to them, and to make ourselves available to them whenever the Spirit sends these moments our way.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning described it this way:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

Blackberries are fine, but we need have our eyes open when the ground we are standing on is ablaze with the glory of God. Monk and writer Thomas Merton even more succinctly. He wrote, “The gate to heaven is everywhere.”

The Transfiguration revealed to us who Jesus truly was: God’s beloved Child, the fulfillment of what God had been doing in the Law and the Prophets, the One we are to listen to, and follow.

God reveals who we truly are in many ways. One good place to look is our baptism, because that where God reveals who we truly are: the beloved children of God, people who are called to help build the kingdom of heaven, by seeking Christ in all persons, by loving others, and working for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being. God also shows who we are in the Holy Eucharist: we are in communion with God, one with Christ, and part of God's people throughout all generations. Let those lights shine in your hearts wherever we find them; they are signs that God desires to work transformation in us. The glory of God was seen in an instant in the Transfiguration. For us, it is going to come more gradually: day upon day, year after year, grace upon grace. In our prayer, in our work, all the mountains and valleys on our path. As we follow the way of Jesus, then like Jesus, we are transfigured more and more into the image and likeness of God. We become who God created us to be. Our lives, more and more, become the place where God's glory shines to give light to the world.

Remember what God is telling you in your baptism and at this communion table. Remember those holy moments when you have experienced the grace and presence of God. Give thanks for them, and learn from them, let them sustain you for the journey ahead. We have been given the very presence of God. So take courage and continue to follow the Way of Jesus. Amen.

Trace Browning

Feast of the Transfiguration, Year A

Exodus 34:29-35 • Psalm 99 • 2 Peter 1:13-22 • Luke 9:28-36

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