

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, 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"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

About eight Sundays ago, on the Feast of the Epiphany, we prayed this: "O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face."

Today, that prayer is answered in part as we witness God's glory face to face with Peter, James and John, and with the great cloud of witnesses in the presence of the Holy One.

Going up to a mountaintop to pray, Jesus has taken the three apostles who watched Jesus raise Jairus's daughter from the dead. Now, Peter, James and John see three people who have unusual circumstances associated with their deaths: Moses, whose body will never be found because God buried it somewhere unknown; Elijah, whose living body left the earth in a whirlwind and a fiery chariot; and Jesus, who will die with his body horribly mutilated and yet will return in a magnificent new body.

As they pray, the apostles see a change – an ethereal event that words can only point out; a mystical moment that can be more fully understood by experience than by description alone. By placing this scene in the context of prayer, Luke reinforces the relationship between the in-breaking of God's

heavenly realm and spiritual practice. By staying awake, the apostles catch sight of Jesus as he truly is. They watch as Jesus' face "become other," or more poetically, "the fashion of his countenance became altered and his raiment lightning white."

Then, appearing in the light of God's glory, we watch with Peter, James and John as they see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus about his exodus – the departure that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The Gospel points to our opportunity, in these last days of Epiphany, to practice staying awake to behold the true and eternal light of God. Only by keeping our eyes open can we hope to enter the darkness of Ash Wednesday and the self-emptying path of Lent, walking as children of light.

Luke reaches back into Hebrew scripture and the story we heard about Moses coming down from a mountaintop. We heard once about the tablets of the new covenant and three times about the glory of God illuminating Moses. The sight of it is more than people can bear.

Fr. Thomas Keating once told me that God is kind enough to peek at us through cracks and in flashes because a pure unfiltered encounter with God would, in his words, "blow the meat off our bones." No wonder Moses chose to wear a protective veil as a filter between YHWH's pure glory and the people!

Paul's lament in his letter to the church in Corinth can sound dismissive of Moses' veil and consequently of the Jewish people. In fact, Paul is not questioning the Jewish faith at all. He is calling out some Jewish Christian teachers of the newly emerging church in Corinth who are insisting that Gentile disciples must also follow Torah regulations, as though they were becoming practicing Jews.

Paul must be empathetic to the effects of direct exposure to the glory of God. His only experience of Christ was his blinding epiphany on the road to Damascus. Paul's hope and his teaching is that people following Jesus are seeking to be transfigured themselves into the image of Christ. His encounter with the light of Christ made him passionate about opening the eyes of others.

The people he accuses of reading Torah under a veil are teachers in Corinth who have not yet experienced turning toward the Spirit in freedom. To have faces that are unveiled in hopes of seeing the glory of God is to see *not* with the eyes of the body or even the eye of the mind, but with what St. Augustine and many others have called the "eye of the soul."

In the 4th c. C.E., to witness the interior illumination of the Holy Spirit, Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: "I entered into the secret closet of my

soul...I entered and beheld with the mysterious eye of my soul the Light that never changes..."

Nine centuries later, St. Angela of Foligno wrote this: "The eyes of my soul were opened, and I beheld the plenitude of God, wherein I did comprehend the whole world, both here and beyond the sea, and the abyss and the ocean and all things. In all these things I beheld naught save the divine power, in a manner assuredly indescribable; so that through excess of marveling the soul cried out with a loud voice, saying 'This whole world is full of God!'"

This is the illumination that Paul experienced and that he hoped for all people to experience. This is the illumination that Peter, James and John experienced.

When God illuminates the soul with the light of the Holy Spirit, as the 4th c. C.E Syrian monk Pseudo-Macarius wrote: "...she becomes all light, all face, all eye. Then there is no part of her that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. There is no part of her that is in darkness, but she is transfigured wholly and in every part with light and spirit."

And yet, the most important movement is the person's response. What follows these life-changing soul saturations is the reason God gives them, though it is also the step most commonly overlooked. Moments of profound enlightenment are not earned keepsakes. They are not mementos for those who experience them. The gift of enlightenment isn't given to be stored in a tent or a church, even one as beautiful as the church now sitting on top of Mt. Tabor.

At some point, we have to come back down the mountain. Moses came down to find the Israelites dancing around a golden calf. Jesus and the three apostles came down to discover that the disciples left downstream have been unable to heal a young boy of a demon.

Any retreat from the world that fills us with the presence of God involves returning to the mundane and chaotic world of human need where we must empty out the love, mercy and grace that we have been shown.

The lectionary allows us to stop the Gospel reading immediately after the transfiguration story, leaving out the story of the upsetting story of the man and his son. In fact, a friend of mine and I were pondering last week whether we would include this part of the story.

Many preachers prefer to focus on the transfiguration. And those who do include the story of the man and his son often take the disciples to task for

their failure. After all, Jesus had given them power and authority over all demons. They should have prayed harder. They should have had more faith.

Saying these kinds of things don't help a parent whose child is not well. They don't help care-givers or Jesus' followers. Life, in my experience, doesn't always comply with even our best efforts. Life is just more complex and rarely so reasonable. Disease and death and evil are here in this world. And so, until God's realm comes in its fullness, some children recover and others suffer.

Our holiness, you see, is not based on our actions, but on what we truly are – children of God's light. Our works don't sanctify us, God sanctifies our works. Reflecting on that truth makes me consider that Luke may have given us this "morning after" story as a way to *complete* the transfiguration of Jesus, our brother.

He went up the mountain, where he was overshadowed by the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed his mother, who was given new life in her womb. The cloud of that Spirit obscured and then claimed the bodies of Moses and Elijah, and then provided for the transition of the physically transfigured Jesus back to a more familiar state.

Instead of remaining in some hyper-spiritual state on a mountaintop, Jesus had to trudge back down into the grunge and impotence of human desperation. I am struck by the human sincerity of his frustration: "How long shall I be with you and endure you?"

And then, as though finally accepting the psychological and emotional transfiguration in an instant, in the very next breath, he pours out what he has been given: "Bring your son here." The boy convulses. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and then restores the child to his father.

We don't hear what Jesus said to the boy, the demon or the father. We don't hear what the boy, the demon or the father say to Jesus. As with any transfiguration, words fall short. Descriptions can only point out.

What we see is that God has transfigured the boy, and has restored the healthy and happy father and child to an image of the reign of heaven. We see Jesus beginning to fulfill, in this act, his own image as God on earth; an image that he will complete on the cross, in his resurrection and ascension.

That's what waits here at this altar – nothing less than the life-changing epiphany experience that we prayed for. And so, come with the eye of your soul open and be astounded at the greatness of God. Come and take in the presence of Christ. Because only if we are filled with the light of Holy Spirit, do we dare turn our faces to the dark road to Jerusalem that lies ahead.

Works cited or consulted:

- Atwell, Robert. *Celebrating the Saints*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017.
- St. Augustine and Philip Burton (translator). *The Confessions*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2001.
- Fulignio, St. Angela De. *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.
- Greene, Adam Lewis. *Bibliotheca*. Writ Press, 2016.
- Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Ben Witherington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.