



## From the Pulpit

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**February 14, 2010**  
**"Living From Top to Bottom"**  
**Exodus 34: 29-35, Luke 9: 28-36**

When I read a passage in the Bible like this one from Luke 9, I take faith in the words of Paul in 1st Corinthians...."now we see in a mirror dimly but then face to face. Now we know in part but then we will understand fully just as we have been fully understood." How can we understand and make sense of these stories of transfiguration and are we meant to?

These two stories of Moses and Jesus are surrounded by a kind of mystery that is hard to penetrate. Shining faces, glowing clothes, the presence of God in the clouds...how are we to speak of them. And maybe we aren't. The disciples were left speechless at the site of Jesus, Moses and Elijah speaking together. It must have been terribly frightening and yet at the same time very exciting. It is on the top of this mountain that they hear without question of Jesus' identity as God's son. There was something enthralling about the moment that the disciples wanted to capture and prolong. They suggest building tents so that Jesus, Moses and Elijah could settle down for a good long talk and the disciples could stay in the presence of this holy moment - like those moments we experience in life that we want to cling to because they bring us into contact with feelings that fill us with wonder and amazement and joy. Last Sunday, at the finish of the super bowl, we sat looking at the TV a bit dazed and overcome by the surprise results of the game. The Colts, favored by a long shot to win the game, had been defeated by the Saints. We still hadn't recovered from the fantastic interception and touchdown run in the 4th quarter when we watched the faces of the Saints' players at the end of the game, glowing and a bit dazed by their own victory. Someone in our group commented, "I bet those players want to hold onto and experience this moment forever." And who could blame them?

These sacred moments are what theologians call liminal moments. These moments belong to a realm understood by religious persons to be at the core of existence and to have a transformative effect on our lives and destinies. Other terms, such as holy, divine, transcendent, ultimate reality, mystery, and purity have been used for this kind of experience. They are moments when a door

opens and we are aware of a realm that exists beyond the physical – beyond what we can hear and smell, see, touch or feel.

In our biblical stories this morning, both Moses and Jesus, experience liminal moments. Having talked with God on top of mountains, they are affected so profoundly that their faces—and in Jesus' case, his clothes as well—literally “glow” with radiance. Both stories are wonderful and amazing. Both men go up a mountain to get away from the tentacles of the world, to rise above them, and to get nearer to the stark reality of God. Both texts make it clear that the reason for the change in both Jesus and Moses is their contact with God. “The skin on his face shone because he had been talking with God,” the author of Exodus exclaims about Moses.

Moses goes to the mountain often; in this case he has returned to the mountain to get the 10 Commandments for the 2nd time. While he was getting the 10 Commandments the first time, his followers—alone in the wilderness, away from the security of being slaves and still under the influence of the pagan gods of Egypt—these followers built a golden calf. Then they began worshipping it instead of worshipping the God who had delivered them from bondage. When God realized what they were doing, he was furious, but Moses convinced God to give the people another chance.

Yet, when Moses came down off the mountain and actually saw what the people were doing he smashed the tablets in his fury. After Moses cooled off a bit, and drawing on all the friendship God felt for him, in the sober, stunned aftermath, Moses returned to the mountain to confer with God, seeking a way that he may right the terrible wrongs that the people have done ... that God might spare their lives and keep them as God's chosen people. Moses once again climbed Sinai, this time staying “with the Lord” for 40 days and 40 nights. Negotiations of this import take a long time. It is when he finally came back to his guilt-ridden, anxious people that our text takes up the story in Exodus. Coming down off the mountain Moses' face was radiant. He had been talking with God and because his face radiated with glory of God Moses put a veil over his face to cover up the light shining from within.

In Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain Jesus needed some personal time with God after preaching all day and feeding the 5,000, as the story relates that appears earlier in Luke 9. Because Jesus knew what faced him shortly in Jerusalem (the crucifixion) Jesus took his most trusted apostles—Peter, John and James—as company up onto the mountain. And as he prayed, his clothes became dazzling white and when his disciples saw his radiance it cemented in their minds that Jesus was God's son and the Messiah. They also saw that he had company. Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah, the two most important figures in all of Hebrew scripture. Moses was the lawgiver, whose own conversations with God left his face shining with a brilliant radiance. Elijah was the lone, prophetic champion of God who not only risked his life before King Ahab and Queen Jezebel by driving out the prophets of Baal, but Elijah also

cured lepers, and raised the dead. Jesus shone with the light of God before his disciples and these two great men of Biblical faith.

But maybe we make a mistake of trying to compare experiences like these of Jesus or Moses too quickly to what we might call a mountain top experience like winning the Super Bowl or the birth of a baby. Fred Craddock says that “there are in the scriptures accounts of experiences of Jesus and of other persons serving the purposes of God for which analogies in our common experiences are not easily found. One reads and studies these accounts, and the experience is one of awe and wonder and worship.” Barbara Brown Taylor says that when we are confronted by an “event that doesn’t fit any of our categories we [just] keep handling it until we wear it down to where it feels safe to us. We just keep analyzing it until we can say something intelligent about it.” We try and make it analogous to our own lives in order to tame it as though we could really ever tame God or understand God.

So lets take a stark, unromantic look at this story of Jesus on the mountain and at his conversation with Moses and Elijah and not tame it to make us feel safe. Luke writes that the three were talking about the exodus of Jesus...the death he would be facing when he came down off the mountain and headed for Jerusalem. Jesus had tried to tell his disciples that this is what faced him to no avail. The week before he went up the mountain with Peter, James and John he had told them, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” And then on the mountain Jesus speaks again of death with Moses and Elijah. But the disciples are sleeping, as they were in the garden before the Jesus’ arrest, and perhaps they missed the conversation. Luke tells us that when they woke up – jolted awake by the vision before them - they didn’t know what they were seeing and they were so stunned they didn’t speak of the event when they came down off the mountain.

What might the significance of this experience have been for the disciples and Jesus? Fred Craddock suggests that the disciples, later reflecting on this experience, might have tried to understand this event in the context of the Moses story that they would have known well: the awesome presence of God, on a “mountain, the cloud, the weeks stay, Moses, the voice the glory.” The transfiguration can also be seen in the context of Jesus’ baptism. At his baptism Jesus heard the voice of God affirming Jesus’ identity, “this is my son in whom I’m well pleased.” This was the experience that launched Jesus’ ministry. Here at the Transfiguration God says, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” Listen to him about what? Listen to him about the suffering and death that lies ahead for him.

Not exactly the message we want on a cold, sunny Sunday in February 2010. We would rather encounter God in a burning bush like Moses on a ladder like Jacob or in a whirlwind like Job. Yet, here on the edge of Lent, we turn with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the mount of Calvary - that is where Jesus is headed. Ann M. Svennungsen writes, “The most profound revelation of God is

not on this mountain. Rather, it is on the cross. The cross reminds us that even in our doubt and sadness, even in the lowest times in life, God is profoundly present.” The cross is a place of transfiguration that is beyond our comprehension. People have also tried to describe it for thousands of years never to really capture the complete essence of it. It is more than sacrifice or substitution. More than a payment made on our behalf or an example. It is an event that brings us face to face with God’s love and the way God does things. Jesus lost his life in order to give us ours.

We encounter God in our dying to self, in service to others, up on our own mountains of spiritual experience or understanding and in the depth of lives lived with openness to whatever comes. In her book, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Barbara Brown Taylor has a chapter on the spiritual practice of “waking up to God.” In it she writes of God as “the More, the Really Real, the Luminous Web That Holds Everything in Place.” Taylor remembers a time when people encountered God out in the world rather than limiting themselves to temples and churches, because “The divine could erupt anywhere, and when it did they marked the spot in any way they could, although there was no sense hanging around for long, since God stayed on the move.” This reminds me of Jesus, on the move from that mountain, headed to another one, where he would show us once again what God’s love looks like, but this time, without light, and without glory.

Many of us are here, I would hope, because we want to have an encounter with the living God. But we want to find God in the safe places, in the beauty of nature, in the beautifully written book, in silence or in the eyes of our children. And we do find God in those places. But as we look out over the 40 days of Lent before us we need to remember the words of Jesus, “ If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (Luke 9: 23-25) God’s presence is woven through all of life, on top of a mountain or on a cross. Open your eyes to the gift of God’s presence...it resides in the most difficult, mundane and surprising places. Amen.