

Experience is a good teacher, but not a perfect one. We can easily draw the wrong lesson from experience. Sometimes people get discouraged too easily when they should be learning persistence; other times, past success with persistence makes people resist cutting their losses. Sometimes people get lucky doing a tricky thing and come away thinking they're more talented than they are. And of course, some people know the text of the Gospels quite well but come away with exactly the wrong idea about who Jesus is and what it means to be a Christian. Let me be clear: if you call yourself a Christian and preach or practice hate, or impose limits on God's grace and love, or don't believe in helping the poor and others in need or trouble... you're doing Christianity wrong.

There is so much more to the life of God than we can perceive, let alone understand, that to an extent, it's not surprising that people so often do get it wrong. I guess I just wish more people would err on the side of kindness and grace. Many sermons condemn St. Peter for suggesting they build "dwellings" for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in this story. And indeed, the problem is not just what Peter says, but that he talks when he should listen. But who among us can be confident that we would have handled the situation better? And it's always important to maintain a sense of perspective. What Peter does isn't all that bad. If we feel a need to be too hard on Peter, that says more about us than him. I tend to agree with D. Mark Davis when he wrote,

"I find this to be the human dilemma. How can we say nothing in the face of such wonder? But, if we say anything, it is bound to be inadequate and to be amiss. Perhaps the best response is, 'Woe is me! I am a person of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!' à la Isaiah. In the end, 'Bedazzled and Blurting' may be as good as it gets for us, unless we cultivate a way of being fully receptive. Maybe there are moments that do not invite 'interactive learning,' but need us to sit on our hands and sew shut our mouths in order to open our ears, eyes, and hearts to something beyond our categories and comments."*

Peter hadn't so much offended God as cheated himself, proposing to substitute dwellings made by human hands for the opportunity to dwell in transcendent fullness of God. And I want to unpack that a bit. Despite the name of the event, the Transfiguration isn't just about a change in how Jesus looked. Presumably it wasn't a permanent change; if it were, people would be talking about Jesus's conspicuously white garments for the rest of the Gospel. And while Matthew and Luke talk about Jesus himself changing, his face shining brightly — and it's hard not to picture the moment that way — Mark only mentions a change in the appearance of Jesus's clothes. That suggests to me that this story is more than it appears to be.

So I want to focus on the appearance of Moses and Elijah. We might imagine they are a spectral image and a literary device. But we risk overlooking the obvious. Moses and Elijah were *there* — despite being long gone. They were not ghosts, images, or holograms, they *are* Moses and Elijah. This tells us that life and death and time are

very different to God. “The fact that Elijah and Moses existed, right there on that day on that mountain, is a breakthrough vision of God’s own timelessness and humanity’s participation in that timelessness through God.”*

So let’s make sure we don’t draw the wrong lesson from the Transfiguration story. We could assume that the dramatic mountaintop setting, which is almost certainly an echo of Mount Horeb in Exodus, is telling us that God is nearest to us in special places. But remember that in Jesus’s day, God was understood to be present in the Temple in Jerusalem in a special way. Some might have assumed that meant that God was “more present” there, and therefore “less present” elsewhere. So if anything, this story is telling us that God is everywhere, even in the most remote places. If God can be manifest on a deserted, unnamed mountain, then God can surely be manifest in our lives and in our souls.

We should also ponder the implications of the glimpse into God’s timelessness, and the indication that those the world calls dead and absent are very much alive and present in God. If we can connect with God anywhere — and I believe the point of the story is that indeed we can — then what we are connecting with is profoundly different from and greater than ourselves. The “space” and “time” and “life” we think we know are but flimsy shadows of the of these things as they truly exist, that is, as they exist to God.

This understanding may pique our imagination, but it should also warm our hearts, in a world that can feel very cold. The Transfiguration may feel like a weird, perhaps even unwelcome, interruption in St. Mark’s urgent, grounded, earthy Gospel. But I now see this story not as an interruption, but the fulcrum, or the hinge, on which the rest of the Gospel turns. Because while the story of Jesus’s public ministry, and the story of Jesus’s passion, demonstrate the power of grace in the world, the Transfiguration makes it abundantly clear that this is not the grace of an especially gracious human being. In this moment, we see that the whole of the Gospel is the story of the grace of God, and therefore, the Gospel lives up to the meaning of the word *euangelion*: the Gospel truly is good news. This story makes dazzlingly clear that Jesus is not a good teacher, or even a great one, he is God’s son, the Beloved, and we should listen to him not because he gives good advice, but because he has come to save us from our sins. Every other story in the Gospel needs to be interpreted in this bright light; every teaching, healing, feeding, and exorcism is a hint of God’s profound love for humanity, and God’s determination to redeem us and be reconciled with us.

So now I understand why this story is read on the Sunday before Lent begins. The Transfiguration helps us to understand not only the whole of the Gospel, but also how the Gospel plays out in a faithful Christian life. So I urge you to begin making preparations for that holy season. In particular, I encourage you, if you have not already done so, to rededicate yourself to worship, good works, and private devotion. Prioritize them, make a plan, and become something of a rebel against our culture of fear, consumerism, and self-righteousness. Your plan need not be elaborate or extremely

austere; what matters most is that your Lenten discipline focuses your heart, mind, and soul on Jesus Christ, his Gospel, and his Church. Not because you need to get on God's good side; you already are, beloved beyond measure. Rather, I urge you to prioritize and focus because the greatest obstacle to the blessings God intends for us is our distractibility and our own wills. As wonderful as mountaintops and experiences and gracious people and good teachers are, still more wonderful is the transformation of our souls when we allow God to lead us through our lives, into to the fullness of life in God.

*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/bedazzled-and-blurting.html>