

Sermon, Transfiguration

I love these amazing, terrifying, dramatic scripture passages!

Elijah, swept up in a chariot of fire, drawn by horses of fire, and ascending in a whirlwind up to heaven... Elisha crying out after his mentor, "father, father!!"

Almighty God, surrounded by a raging storm and consuming flames, coming to judge the earth in righteousness...

And then Jesus "powers up," as it were. He is suddenly transfigured on the mountain, radiant, resplendently beaming as though he were the ultimate source of all the light in the cosmos... He is then joined by Moses, the lawgiver, and by Elijah, arguably the most powerful of all the prophets of Israel... The whole crowd of them is overshadowed by a celestial cloud, out of which comes the voice of God almighty: "This is my Son, the beloved;" And then the imperative, simple directive: "listen to him."

I love these amazing, scripture passages, which clearly point to the wonder, power, mystery, and sovereignty of God... but I'll tell you the truth: *I'm never exactly sure what to make of them.*

Where did these stories come from? I don't think that clever myth-making scribes with too much time on their hands sat down together and discussed which metaphors and literary images might best be called upon to express a nascent theological insight for future readers. "Let's imagine a mountain, a cloud, some blinding light, and a big voice out of nowhere. And with those raw ingredients, we'll paint Jesus as the heavenly Messiah. That should be persuasive!"

I don't believe that folks just invented these accounts *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Something extraordinary and impressive happened in real places, on specific days, with real people. And while the oral transmission of the Old Testament stories would have allowed for modifications before the feather quill and ink finally settled things on parchment or papyrus, it's still hard to imagine what kind of pedestrian original event could have gotten juiced up to eventually become chariots and horses of fire in a whirlwind.

As for the New Testament accounts, the self-deprecating role of the story tellers is an indication to me that these were eye-witness accounts. If I am trying to *invent* some miraculous moment, attributing the wondrous works to the master whose disciple I am, I am going to represent my Lord as doing a comprehensible thing with a specific purpose. I am going to represent myself as insightful, a good and faithful follower who comprehends and celebrates what is going on. I will write myself up in the story as one who readily adopts the teaching presented there. Doubtless the good teacher will send us good disciples out to tell everyone we meet what wonders we have experienced.

What we actually find in this passage is that the eyewitnesses are described as terrified, hysterical, mystified, unbelieving, and left wondering what on earth any of this means! And if they had some notions about running to spill this sensational story to the Galilean equivalent of the CNN correspondents, Jesus explicitly commands them not to breathe a word of it to anyone.... Not “until after he has risen from the dead.” And if we had been there in Peter, or James, or John’s sandals, we would have done exactly what they’re recorded as doing. They question among themselves what Jesus could possibly mean about “rising from the dead.” It’s a similar pattern. Jesus acts; Jesus speaks; the disciples scratch their heads, argue about which of them is the greatest, and get scolded by Jesus for being so obtuse, distracted, and worldly-minded.

What might some of the real life ingredients be in this transfiguration account? Deuteronomy 34: vss 1 & 7 speak of Moses as dying on Mt. Nebo. There is the Moses connection. A plausible scenario for Elijah’s last peregrination could put him just about fourteen miles ESE from the Jordan River, at the peak of Mt. Nebo. If that speculation is accurate, then it is plausible that Moses and Elijah both departed this life from that historic mountain. The picture begins to coalesce as we hear that Jesus speak there about the end of his earthly journey. Peter, in his second epistle, called the mount of transfiguration a holy mountain¹—and the inter-testamental book, 2 Maccabees, tells us that Mt. Nebo was sanctified to God or made holy.² It is also stated that the majesty of the LORD shall appear, and there shall be a cloud as it was also shown to Moses. These events fit the transfiguration—the disciples saw Jesus’ majesty and the cloud.*

So what? What are we to make of this time-traveling confluence of ancient characters on a venerable middle-eastern hilltop? How could we possibly relate to this account? What possible significance might it have for our faith? Here is one approach. I believe we can draw a plausible personal psychological parallel to this historical and religious narrative.

Moses was understood by all Jewish believers, and certainly by everyone there in Mark's account, as the lawgiver. Through Moses, God gave profound and far-reaching commandments about how the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were to live together in the land God would give them. The words we receive from parents and grandparents as young children are like the laws of Moses. They establish a basic moral, behavioral, and social framework. They are memorized and repeated frequently: "Be nice to your sister; tell the truth; share; save, and don't spend all your money; when you meet someone, shake hands, look the person in the eye, and say "how do you do?"; work hard; say "please" and "thank you"; pick up your toys when you're done playing;" and if we grew up in towns like Mattapoisett, Rochester, and Marion, we were solemnly admonished, "get accepted at a good school, like your ancestors did." Do we not draw on a common framework of basic laws for life?

Along comes Elijah, as an exemplar of the prophets. The prophets not only know the law, but they are inspired by God to tell the mind of God to specific people in a specific situation. They tell how the Spirit of God is moving in that day, and how the Spirit will move in days to come. Elijah's principal calling is to challenge to people of Israel to decide for themselves who is the true God, and who are the counterfeits. The faithful will forsake their false Gods and come back to worship the one true God.

Once we, in our personal journeys, have obeyed the family and gone off to good colleges or universities, we encounter professors and authors who challenge us to move beyond our inherited frameworks. We begin to understand new perspectives; we experiment with freedoms not accorded us at home. We flirt with new ideas about right and wrong, about our purpose in life. We realize that a panoply of options is available to us. We search for mentors who can give us a fresh word to guide our lives, who can be mentors of possibilities beyond what our parents modeled for us.

Have we not looked to prophetic voices in our early adulthood to inspire us and move us to brave convictions? To join the military service? To join the Peace Corps? To protest the status quo? To join the commune? To save the world?

And finally, along comes Jesus, the Son of Man, God's Spirit wrapped up in human flesh and blood, to lead all humanity into the secure grip of God's saving love. His message begins with the cry: "God is among us! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! The next phrase in Christ's preaching tells us what we already know. We have not figured things out. We have not gotten our moral, behavioral, and social design just right. For all that we can be justly proud of, for all our clever, inspired innovations, for all our prestigious teachers and mentors, we also have accumulated a closet full of regrets and sadness. So we need to come to God in an humble spirit, asking for forgiveness and restoration. And the resplendent glory of it all is that while God's light shines into our darkest places to reveal what we have tried to conceal or ignore, it shines in with a winsome love to cleanse us, raise us, and make us new.

You were brought up with your family laws. Good. You were inspired and guided by prophetic voices in daring new directions. Good. And God will not willingly let you miss the security and blessedness of His saving love. Jesus is among us with God's own authority, life, light, and mystery. He doesn't want us to miss what he's got for us.

Like Peter, James, and John; like all those who would climb a spiritual mountain to be enlightened; let us listen to this beloved one. In Jesus, the fullness of God's life and love are offered to us. Let's listen to him.
Listen, most of all, to him.

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2 Pet. 1:18;

¹ 2 Macc 2:8