

Obviously it Happens on a Mountain

2026 02 15 Toronto United Mennonite Church

Transfiguration Sunday

[Exodus 24:12-18](#) - Moses and Joshua enter the cloud

[Matthew 17:1-9](#) - Jesus' transfiguration

Obviously it happens on a mountain - most weird Bible stories start when people go up a mountain. In Wales they say that if you have to spend the night on the mountain, in the morning you might become very wise, if you don't go crazy. My mountain-climbing friends tell me that time spent in the mountains is not deducted from your life span. The environmental philosopher John Muir advocated that everyone should be able to experience what he called 'mountain baptism', saying 'I would rather be in the mountains thinking about God, than in church thinking about the mountains.'

Perhaps mountains are such spiritual places because you have to work to get up there. At a certain elevation a mountain will always be at least somewhat dangerous to human life, requiring respect and caution. From the mountain you can see further, including seeing how far you have come already. And on the mountain, there are fewer people around, less noise and concern, and you can listen more clearly to the presence of God who is with you always.

You don't have to go up a mountain to have a spiritual experience, which I know as a native of the flattest part of Britain. Jesus preached on the plains and in the streets just as well as on the mount, and his life story tells us that a stable is not less sacred than a palace. I can't take you to a mountain today, but perhaps you'll join me in thinking about God and particularly about the mysterious account of the Transfiguration.

It is hard to know exactly what to make of the Transfiguration. It was clearly important to the early disciples - it features in three Gospels and one of the letters, and has inspired Christian art, music, and theology over the ages. Liturgical churches

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remember the Transfiguration each year in August, and sometimes also at the end of the season that begins with Epiphany, the week that Lent begins - today.

The Transfiguration is a spectacular event - a select group of disciples witness a trans-dimensional gathering making it clear how significant Jesus is to the plan of God, and to the nation of Israel. Moses, the lawgiver and liberator, who spoke face-to-face with God, is the prototype of the priestly leader, with special access to God's wisdom, accompanied by the shining cloud of God's presence, and ordained to lead the people into freedom. Elijah, the archetype of the prophet, the one who tormented kings and preserved faithful worship during the years of suppression, and who is prophesied to come again to herald the Messiah.

The Transfiguration reveals that there is more going on than human senses can tell us. This story breaks down the boundaries between time and space, death and life, the law and the spirit, in one shining moment unifying all these different ideas under God's power. Sometimes, when I try very hard, or in a moment of insight that has nothing to do with my efforts, I can perceive the hidden currents and forces that affect the world. Some are benign, others malign, and some are divine. Power is hidden, and it is easy to be distracted, or so convinced of one truth that you miss another. But even so, sometimes a mountaintop moment of clarity speaks your name, and you feel like you've arrived home. No wonder Peter wanted to camp out.

The climax of this Transfiguration spectacle names Jesus as the Beloved of God, magnifying his teaching and commandments, making clear his divine nature. For the readers of the gospel, we already know these things, but the disciples are still piecing it together. Those who have followed him this far believe that he is God's anointed one, but they don't understand him. Matthew places the Transfiguration between two stories where Jesus tells the disciples about his death, which provokes distress and anger. The two things make no sense - that the anointed one of God would contemplate his death, even seem to accept it.

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The stories around the Transfiguration are also stories of the disciples failing. When someone comes to them for help, they are unable to do anything until Jesus steps in. They argue with his teachings. They forget to bring food. Within the narrative, they seem to be learning the wrong lesson at each turn, drawing the wrong conclusions.

Truthfully, I have a lot of sympathy for the disciples. In the present day, millennia later, you would think that we could do better. But the truth is that the message of Jesus is routinely and offensively misapplied today. The people who most loudly proclaim themselves as followers of Jesus seem to have no trouble crowding their lives with guns, barbed wire fences, security forces, stores of wealth, monopolies on labour, philosophies of dehumanisation and domination. And those people give a license to others to live hollow lives in the same way. Nothing about this resembles the life of Jesus or points to the transcendent moment. And as much as I put my trust in borders and bank accounts to keep me safe and comfortable, I deny the transfiguration. I misunderstand and misrepresent the way of Jesus.

The transfiguration of Jesus, and the divine encounter of Moses, and every other time the sudden appearance of divine life interrupts the ordinary - these moments are gifts to us, who find it so easy to lose our focus. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God calls us back to the centre, to the present moment, the only moment where we are alive.

This week, murder. This week, guns were made available. This week earthquakes, separations, cancer, betrayal. This week, reactions, accusations, cliché comprehension, and then flip to the Olympics, or the weather.

This is why Jesus asks us to pray. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.

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Jesus tells us that we don't need to go out and pray loudly. Our words don't need to drown out others, or deny reality, or replace action, but in the middle of sudden horror, we can make a quiet place and a sacred moment with prayer.

I'm saying that we can pray when we become aware of violence and injustice, because prayer asks us to inhabit that moment with our intentions, and if you can't find words or movements to communicate with God, you can hold a thought, or light a candle, or recite something. You can invite transfiguration.

And prayer is not a substitute for action. It is a humble offering of our action to God, a request that God's kingdom of justice and peace would reign on earth, as it is in heaven. Like the Mount of Transfiguration, in prayer we call upon the prophets and the law, the saints and the ancestors, the angels and the powers to join us in this moment, to be aligned to God's will.

Obviously this can happen on a mountain. Obviously if you gather a thousand singers and choke up the place with incense and praise, you can easily transfigure the moment. But I can't take you up a mountain today. There's hunger and bitterness on the streets of Toronto. There's poison in the water and fire in the summer. Will you speak the prayers of hope in the days of despair ahead, to peer through smoke and tears to see what shines?

I'm going to try and practice this over Lent. I am going to ask God to take away my distractions and help me be more truthful, more free, more alive. Lent is what happens after Transfiguration, after the luminous mystery, the time of silent wandering.

Elijah called down fire from heaven and won a spectacular victory. And then he went away, consumed by loss and loneliness, until God met him in the silence.

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Moses shone with the radiance of God after he came down the mountain, and then spent his remaining decades leading his people through hardship, sorrow, and grumbling towards a goal he knew he would never see.

Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and then he was immediately forced into the wilderness to face the temptation.

I hope you have had those mountaintop moments in your life. I hope you have heard the call of God and have worked out what faithfulness requires of you. If you don't know that God loves you and invites you into this new life that Jesus taught us, and that we are still trying to figure out together, then this might not make sense. But you don't need to go up a mountain to have that encounter. You have already heard a voice from heaven - "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" So listen, and live.

These teachings, and the way Jesus lived his life asks something of us. It stops us from accepting the simple naive answers of our culture and the powers that be. The journey of following Jesus requires us to go into the wilderness, to learn new laws for living. This is a journey of the willing, and a response of the called. We travel with Jesus away from the safety of false certainty, and towards the risky place of truth. But we do not journey alone. God's people are with us. God is with us.

Over Lent we will be 'Dwelling in Dissonance'. Our world does not make sense. Our priorities are confused and contradictory, the hope we long for is elusive, and our sense of safety is assailed by illusions on one side, and very real threats on the other.

I invite you to commit to the weeks ahead as a time of prayer, scripture, and reflection. Each Friday we email out the scriptures for the next two Sundays and we'll have a printed copy for you to take. Read them, engage them. Ask God to show you something we need, and then tell someone. Discern together. You can pray here on Thursday or Sunday, or at home. Be open. Know that as we search for wisdom, Holy Wisdom is searching for us. Thanks be to God.