

They go up on a high mountain by themselves, unaware of how soon they would fall to the ground in fear. Peter, James, and John, representing the disciples, follow Jesus to the mountaintop. And there he's transfigured before them. His face shining like the sun, his clothes shimmering white. Israel's greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah, appear to them, and are talking with Jesus. Peter attempts to join the conversation, and offers each of them hospitality in the form of a tent, until he's interrupted mid-sentence by a cloud enveloping them, and a voice from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Upon hearing this voice, the disciples collapse to the ground in fear. They don't come to until Jesus touches them. "Rouse yourselves and don't be afraid." Looking up, they see only Jesus. Jesus alone.

Interesting, that phrase, "Jesus alone." What's become of Moses and Elijah? Why have they suddenly vanished? If this is a meeting of the greatest prophets, why didn't Jesus also vanish with the cloud that enveloped this mountain just moments ago? Well, because Jesus is glorified on this mountain. His face transfigured. Until today, we've seen that all of the miracles are ones Jesus performs on others. He's the giver, and others the recipients. But today, he alone is the one on whom the glory of God shines. Moses and Elijah are present. Only Jesus is glorified.

Then again, Moses has also gone up a high mountain. He came into the very presence of God. In fact, from a valley point of view, his mountaintop experience could be said to have been more of a blockbuster than Jesus' experience. Exodus says a cloud covered Mt. Sinai for six days, and then on the seventh day, Moses entered the cloud. Exodus says, "The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel." Can you see the drama of that, the top of the highest mountain, on fire, for a week? And Moses walks into the fire. And stays on the mountain for 40 days. And when he comes down, carrying the tablets of the covenant, his face is shining so brightly that Aaron and all the Israelites are afraid to come near him. But today the disciples see Jesus alone. Where'd Moses go?

And Elijah. They should make more movies about Elijah, too. The word of the Lord calls to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." A mighty wind comes, splits the mountains and breaks their rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then an earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. And if that's not an impressive connection to the Lord, Elijah leaves this life in the first ever recorded blaze of glory. Elisha is witness to the chariots of fire and the horses of fire, rushing between them, as Elijah is taken into heaven. Jesus' transfiguration story sounds like a contemplative weekend at a retreat center compared to that. But on this high mountain, the cloud dissipates. The disciples focus. They see Jesus alone.

Why? Because now the disciples can see that all of Israel's history points to Jesus, and now Jesus bears all of Israel's history in his work and teaching, and in his very body. And it has

become clearer to the disciples now that in light of what they've seen on this mountain, and the voice of God's declaration, they stand alongside Moses and Elijah as worshippers. Remember what Paul said: that "the glory of Moses' face is fading" (2 Cor. 3:7), as Jesus' face brightens. Elijah has come again in the person of John the Baptist, who points to Jesus. So Moses and Elijah no longer appear to the disciples, because now the disciples can see that Moses and Elijah now also worship Jesus.

But another question has been perplexing me, and the answer to this one I believe holds the key to unlocking the greater part of this text's mystery. How is it that when the disciples do see this bewildering event, the face of Jesus metamorphosing before them, with Israel's great prophets standing beside him, that they're able to remain standing? They see all of this, and yet they stand. Peter is still talking! In fact, the disciples remain upright until the cloud envelopes them all and they hear the voice. There is nothing there to protect them from the voice. God has not hidden them in the cleft of any rock. But they don't fall until they hear the voice. What is it that the voice of God says that is so overwhelming that it sends them tumbling when the visual revelation they've received did not? *The voice of the Lord thunders! The disciples melt.* What did God say?

Of course, we know what God said: "This is my Son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" But what significance does this carry? What has Jesus just said to them that God insists they must hear? For that, we must recall the time immediately preceding the Transfiguration...when "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you'" (Mt. 16:21-22).

But if they would not be persuaded by Jesus telling them, have they been persuaded by Jesus' face foreshadowing resurrection, and the voice of God saying, "Listen to him!" What sends the disciples to the ground? Is it not the confirmation of Jesus' true identity, the revelation of his final destiny, that really terrifies the disciples?

For now, they see that it's not only this son whose eyes flame like fire
and whose face shines like the sun

But it's this beloved Son who will be *betrayed*.

... who will be *tried*.

...*battered*.

...*bound*.

...*pierced* and *butchered*.

...*buried*.

...but *raised from the dead!*...

"This....*This!*...is my Son, the beloved. LISTEN TO *HIM!*"

Annie Dillard said, "When too much light falls on everything, a special terror results." When does the reality of what Jesus is doing begin to dawn on us? Moses died and remains buried. Elijah has come to an end in John the Baptist. Jesus? Jesus has come to take on death, itself. And this is the realization that leaves our heads spinning.

I know of a young woman who is battling cancer and has been for 18 months. Her prognosis has improved dramatically, but she's still in a fight for her life. Kate. 36 years old. A professor. With a husband. And a little boy. She was in the doctor's office. Her oncologist, she said, has fought his own battles and knows what it means to struggle against death itself. She was quizzing him about his own journey. "I'm not sure I want to know what happens if I stop chemotherapy, but at the same I want to get it over with," Kate confessed. "What did you do?" she asked him. "I went to work," he said... and then, answering her unspoken question, said, "We're all terminal" (Kate Bowler, katebowler.com, "The Hard Way," posted Sept 12, 2016).

Remember what Jesus said. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:24-25).

But remember this also. When the cloud cleared and the dust settled, Jesus comes to the weak-kneed disciples. He picks them up. He meets and touches them, and says, "Arise, and don't be afraid."

To us he says the same... "Lift up your heads. Lift up your hearts. Lift up your cross. Don't be afraid."