

Last Epiphany            Luke 9:28-43a  
Christ and Grace        March 3, 2019  
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Every year the story of the Transfiguration is the bridge between the season after the Epiphany and the season of Lent. It shines light on the connection between heaven and earth. In my reading, I came across a description of this passage in a commentary by Debi Thomas I found so powerful that I want to share it with you. Here's how she paraphrased it:

On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response — "Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!" A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. "This is my Son, my Chosen." The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master — the Shining One — and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him."

In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes — wide-open, feral — sees nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame. "Frauds!" someone yells into the night. "Charlatans!" "Where's your Master?" the scribes ask the disciples an umpteenth time. "Why has he left you?" "We don't know," the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again — an echo straight from hell. He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face. A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night. "This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. "Please," he sobs to the stars. "Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him."<sup>1</sup>

Did the dazzling light cast even a glimmer down to those who waited in the dark? Did the crowd glimpse the ominous cloud that descended over Peter, James, and John? Did they hear even a rumble — distant like thunder — when God spoke of his Chosen One? We'll never know.

What we do know is that life in the valley can be hard, that suffering is real, and when the clouds of life close in around us, it can be difficult to see or hear the presence of God. What we do know is that Peter, James, and John followed Jesus up the mountain to pray, his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah, prophets who had died centuries earlier appeared and they were talking to Jesus about what was going to happen in Jerusalem. Peter, the helpful disciple who always wants to DO something said, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let's make three dwellings."

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<sup>1</sup> Debi Thomas <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/813-the-view-from-the-valley>

It's interesting to notice that the disciples were not at all afraid, until the cloud overshadowed them. Imagine a thick, heavy cloud, like a fog rolling in to cover them completely. They were terrified; this was not what they expected.

Sometimes we find that we are *not* prepared for what life brings us. We think we are following the laws, we think life is going to go a certain way, and then the cloud descends and we cannot see what to do next. What was once very clear to us becomes foggy. All of our preparation seems useless. The Jesus we thought we knew is suddenly so much more than we bargained for; the God who has always been beside us suddenly seems distant. Then what do we do?

It's like driving in fog. We all know from driver's education that when we're driving in fog we are never supposed to use our high beams, right? But how many of us, knowing this, still test what we already know, still flip those headlights to the bright setting? Because we can't see what's ahead we try the high beams, and then we panic because we can see even less in our attempt to master the fog. It's a great illustration of our instinctive reaction whenever we are afraid or uncertain, and it's a reminder that to navigate the unknowns of life we must trust that the landmarks are still there, even if they are hidden by the fog; that God is with us, seen and unseen.

In their new awareness of Jesus as the Son of God, and realizing that they were not, after all, in control of anything, they made a decision to follow Jesus. They followed Jesus back down the mountain to the valley below, where life was messy, relationships were challenging, and work needed to be done.

Sometimes we tend to interpret the Bible as if its stories apply only to us as individuals. My mountaintop experience. My valley. My relationship with God. But this can be misguided and dangerous. The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain is as important as my joy. My beliefs do not ever give me permission to rob you of your dignity. The truth is that it is entirely possible for some of us to sit in church on Sunday morning joyful in the presence of God's Spirit — while others of us work hard to contain our tears because God's presence seems hidden in the cloud of our fear, anxiety, and great need. The truth is, that while we worship in this beautiful, safe place there are others outside these walls who are hungry or homeless.<sup>2</sup> Whether we are dwelling in safety or uncertainty, we are all in need of Transfiguration. It's why I don't think it's a coincidence that all three accounts of the Transfiguration in scripture are immediately followed by the story of the demon-possessed child in the valley.

“Listen to him!” said the voice from the cloud. Listen to Jesus. Sometimes that is so hard to do. Like Peter, we want to remain safely in the glorious places of our lives. But we are called to follow Jesus back down the mountain, trusting that God is also in the valley. Even when the fog makes it impossible to see the path ahead, we follow in faith, trusting that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced, and trusting that God will be with us.

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, <http://journeywithjesus.net/essays/813-the-view-from-the-valley>

We are about to move into the season of Lent, into a time when we can be more intentional about seeing and listening to Jesus. Spending time in the cloud of God's mysterious holiness is where God begins to transfigure us.

There are a number of Lenten offerings, beginning on Ash Wednesday, that will help us see the connection between the mountain and the valley, between heaven and earth; offerings of worship and study that will reveal God's presence to us wherever we find ourselves this Lent.

May we trust that when the fog comes, when the cloud descends, we are God's beloved ones. And we too will be changed into God's likeness, from glory to glory. We will not longer be covered in clouds, but drenched in the dazzling light of God's love.

Amen.