

## To the Mountaintop! – Part 7

Every second Sunday of Lent we suddenly find ourselves on the mountaintop. We believe the Mountain of Transfiguration is actually the relatively small 1,886 foot high Mount Tabor. This hill/mountain rises out of the level farmlands/plains in Galilee, making it look even larger. Today the Church of the Transfiguration is on that mountain.

It seems strange that we should go from the desert to the mountaintop so quickly. You would think the Church would take us on such an ascent towards the end of Lent. Why every second Sunday of Lent do we achieve such lofty splendor?

We are given this glorious scene precisely because it is early in Lent. The Church knows Lent is an ascetical season of discipline. An authentic Lent contains difficult times of fasting, penance, wrestling prayer, almsgiving, and sacrificial deeds. We disciples of the Lord strive to deepen our relationship with God, focus on interior and exterior change, and turn away from sin. We are trying to break bad habits and develop new ones. To help us with our worthy endeavor, the Church offers us an early Easter. Simply put, we need hope. Like Peter, James, and John, we are invited to get a glimpse of glory.



The Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor is an euphoric, ecstatic, ethereal experience of supernatural glory. We all crave a God–encounter, and this is it. If you have ever experienced the glory of God, you know that it is pleasurable and ecstatic. A vision of God produces rapturous feelings. As a mystified Peter stated: "Lord, it is good for us to be here." Because we are early on in Lent and we have a long journey ahead of us, the Church offers us this exhilarating vision so that we will be strong and not give up or relent in the work that Lent demands.

Unless we have tasted God's goodness, we will become discouraged. Every once in a while, we need times of consolation and comfort lest we grow weary and become disheartened. The Church knows this, and, a scant quarter of the way into Lent, gives us this uplifting vision. Even if we do not "feel" the vision, this scene fires our religious imagination.

First, religious experiences are meant to deepen us spiritually. Jesus was revealing himself to Peter, James, and John as the Son of God. Having had this ethereal experience left no doubt in their minds. The Gospels were written to convince its readers that Jesus is the Son of God. In this experience, these disciples were illumined about who Jesus really was.

While the disciples' faith in Jesus was being deepened, Jesus himself was also further awakened as to who he was. On Mount Tabor there is the Franciscan Church of the Transfiguration. It was completed in 1924, on the site of the remains of a church from the fifth century. This is the traditional place of Jesus' celestial experience. Within the church itself there are two main sanctuaries. One is the upper level chapel, dedicated to the divinity of Christ. The lower chapel is dedicated to the humanity of Christ.

What we have to be reminded about is that Jesus was human as well as divine. While perfect morally, the human Jesus did not know all things and, just like any human, his self understanding had to evolve. Experiences like what happened to him at his baptism (an identity moment) as well as his extended time in the desert, helped him grasp his identity as the Messiah and Son of God. On Mount Tabor, the voice of God announcing Jesus as his beloved Son must have illumined Jesus even further. Jesus, human like us, needed experiences of grace to come to his full self awareness. It also revealed to Jesus, the future "exodus" in Jerusalem on the cross.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton taught about the dichotomy between what he called the true self and the false self. The false self is the persona we develop and show to the world (and even ourselves) trying to get approval. If you want to know what the false self is, watch some politicians, comedians and even preachers. They try to win their audiences through humor and taking on a persona that is not real. To some degree, we all have this. The real, or authentic self is our best self, calm, sincere, and in touch with our inner life. Through silence and contemplation, we can transcend our false self and get in touch with who we really are. This is what is meant: "Go from the superficial to the supernatural." In the desert, Jesus was discovering who he really was and lived out of that self-discovery for the rest of his life. His authenticity and sincerity attracted many to him and gave him power as well as authority. We, like Jesus, must discover our spiritual side and best self. Self-discovery is a major part of the journey of Lent. An individual who once had a near-death experience said, "The first person you meet in heaven is yourself (who you really are).

Along with deeper self-discovery, the human Jesus was having a God experience. This "theophany" happened at his baptism in the Jordan where he experienced God's glory and heard God's voice. God's presence is usually accompanied by light, a cloud of glory, and often a voice of some sort. The voice of God was addressed to Peter, James, and John: "Listen to him." The voice was overheard by Jesus: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Illumination comes when you realize your true identity is that of a son or daughter of God. This is our truest self. Our core identity is not based on things, finances, or even human relationships. In addition, when you sense you are in the middle of God's will and God is pleased with your life, you are walking in grace. The main goal of Lent is enlightenment – illumination about who we truly are and deepening our relationship with God.

Secondly, along with illumination, religious experiences are meant to strengthen us for the challenges ahead. In the song "Amazing Grace," we sing: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. 'Twas grace has brought us safe thus far and grace will lead me home." We all have many dangers, challenges, and problems to endure and go through. God does not leave us to navigate troubles on our own. God helps us.

These two spiritual experiences shows how God takes us to himself and reveals his glory to us. It helps to transform us into a spiritual person and to strengthen us in whatever challenges we may face in life. Instead of succumbing, we find inner strength through remembering God's grace. These experiences, help to fortify us when faced with trials, tribulations, and challenges of every sort. Through this grace, we gain a firm foundation and inner strength.

# Be Strong

The Church gives us this uplifting reading of the Transfiguration, early in Lent to fortify us in our Lenten and life trials. Lent is a long season of penance, fasting, and other trials. Without a vision, people perish. (Proverbs 29:18). We need grace to endure. Through the Scriptures, this glorious vision becomes our vision. The Bible has a way of transporting an event through time and space in order that we can participate in that happening right where we are.

People who may have had a religious experience should treasure it. This grace is given to them in order to strengthen them for the journey ahead. This is the role that this Gospel plays every Second Sunday of Lent. The early Easter and glimpse of Glory given to us is meant to empower and strengthen us as we continue with the long Lent ahead of us.

As soon as the vision was over, Jesus, Peter, James, and John came down from the mountaintop and were met with a boy possessed by a demon. It did not take long before they were met with trouble! This often happens as soon as you get home from a retreat. You may get into an argument with your spouse, or perhaps you will get a flat tire driving home, or it could be that you suddenly get the bad news that a family member was in an accident. The purpose of the retreat (and spiritual exercises) is to illumine you as well as fortify you for the challenges ahead.

You may be thinking: "Wait a minute, I have never had any religious experiences... What is wrong with me?" Although some may be in your future (keep expecting them!), there is nothing wrong with you if you have not had a "religious experience." God gives as he sees fit. Take courage in the words of Jesus: "Blessed are they who believe without seeing." (John 20:29).

In a very real way, the faith of those who believe without having to have something powerful and experiential is more blessed than the faith of those who need something dramatic. Peter wrote: "Without having seen him you love him." (1 Peter 1:8). We are blessed if touched dramatically and blessed if not.

Peter, James, and John – of all the disciples – were handpicked by Jesus to come to the mountaintop to experience something special. God has specially chosen you and me as well, too.

## Be Transfigured!

There are three different accounts of the transfiguration. Mark is the original account. Matthew and Luke took Mark's material and adapted it. For example, a major theme in the Gospel of Luke is prayer. In Mark and Matthew, we are told that, once on the mountain, Jesus was transfigured. But Luke gives us further insight. Jesus took his disciples up the mountain specifically to pray. Luke also has Jesus praying as he was baptized, although the other Gospels do not mention this fact. At both his baptism and mountaintop experience, prayer provides the context for a theophany. A theophany is when God's manifested presence appears, and God is revealed dramatically. In the mountaintop theophany, light is seen, glory is felt, and a voice is heard. In Luke, it was as Jesus was praying that he was transfigured. Luke is telling us that it is prayer that connects us with God and brings about change. Each Gospel must be read individually and taken on its own merit.

The word used for transfiguration in the Greek is where we get the word metamorphosis. When you think about change, think about the process of becoming. Remember, the RCIA is a process. It makes sense then, that the candidates (those already baptized and seeking full communion in the church) can seek reconciliation from the second week on. The catechumens – now the elect (those seeking baptism) – can receive the sacrament of reconciliation anytime, but usually do so closer to the Easter Vigil. All of us ought to celebrate reconciliation by going to confession at some point during the season of Lent.

Lent is a time of "ongoing conversion." Conversion is multifaceted but boils down to personal change and movement towards God. People do not change all at once. Change is incremental and progressive. Paul the apostle put it this way: "All of us are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18). We are transformed and transfigured from glory to glory, little by little, by God.

Think about the caterpillar who begins as a worm then spins a chrysalis. The time within the chrysalis is crucial. If the process is interrupted or cut short, the worm will not develop fully. Growth and change happens slowly and often in secret. Whether we realize it or not, metamorphosis will occur. When the time is right, something wonderfully new emerges: a butterfly. We, too, are "new creations" in Christ.

Most do not realize this, but our lives have an overarching goal. Many do not realize what the goal of their life is. We have goals such as to study, achieve, and realize our potential professionally. We also may have goals to marry and raise a family. But as Christians, our main goal and purpose is to become the likeness and image of Jesus. "We are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus." (Romans 8:29). This is the main goal of our life!

The objective of Lent is to change, yes, but to change into what? We are to imitate and become the character of Christ. We are all invited to become an alter Christus (another Christ). We become a servant in Christ, for Christ, and with Christ.

We strive not to just become better people but to take on the character of Christ. Jesus himself said: "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart." (Matthew 11:29). From the Scriptures, we learn that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. (Numbers 12:3). Meekness is not weakness, but strength under control. Meekness is Jesus standing silent before the Sanhedrin when derided. He said not a word when under duress before King Herod. We are meek when we are obedient even though we have the opportunity to sin.

Jesus was also humble. Humility comes from the word humus. Humus soil is dark, rich, and fertile. When a seed is planted in such soil, it grows quickly and abundantly. "This is the one whom I approve, says the Lord, the humble and afflicted one who trembles at my word." (Isaiah 66:2). Humble people are reverent. They are surrendered, open, and willing to learn and grow. This is the opposite of prideful, opinionated people who think they know it all. One of the most famous Scriptures in the whole of the Old Testament is: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

Remember, Lent is about rending our hearts and not just our garments. In the Bible, people rent their garments as a sign of mourning. But they also tore their garments as a sign of sorrow and humility. In the "Act of Contrition" we pray: "I am heartily sorry for having offended thee..." We are sorry for our offenses against God and humbly want to make a change.

There is a bumper sticker: "Be patient with me, God's not done with me yet." We are all in a process. Perhaps one may need to be more patient with themselves and exercise some self compassion. Instead of beating yourself up because of how you have not grown, think more about how you have progressed.

God is not necessarily interested in who you were and the mistakes you have made. God is looking for fruit, for your end product. God understands we will sin and make mistakes. The key is to learn from them.

While ongoing conversion (purification and enlightenment) is difficult, it must be our goal throughout Lent and all of our lives. There is a great saying that expresses this: "Who you are is God's gift to you. Who you become is your gift to God."

During his transfiguration, Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah (representing the law and the prophets). Mark and Matthew do not tell us the subject of their conversation, but Luke does. They were speaking about his "exodus," which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. Even this early in Lent, the shadow of the cross looms over Jesus' life.

We have already referred to some weekday readings such as on Ash Wednesday or the Friday and the Monday following. One other weekday reading is the Wednesday of the second week of Lent. In this weekday reading we hear about the plot contrived against Jeremiah. In the Gospel of that day, we hear Jesus predicting his Passion. Already, this early in Lent, we get an insight as to where we are heading: The Passion. The risen Jesus would later tell his disciples: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). So it is with us. Our Lenten and necessary sufferings will eventually lead us to glory.

Like Peter, James, and John, we have an exclusive invitation to go to the mountaintop. It is on the mountaintop that God's voice is heard. We are witnesses to light and glory. This vision is meant to illumine us and fortify us for the challenges ahead. We can have our best Lent ever because of grace. As we see in Jesus, the purpose of Lent is for us to be transfigured. Our metamorphosis will involve suffering but will also help mold us into the image of Jesus.

Lenten Lessons:

- We are specially chosen
- Revelation comes to enlighten us and fortify us
- No matter what our trial, we can be strong
- Our main purpose is to become Christ-like

Lenten Action:

- Remember how God has touched you in the past and be fortified

