

GOD ON THE MOUNTAIN MARCH 2, 2025

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The Transfiguration LUKE 9:28-36

²⁸ *About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure,^[a] which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.*

This morning as we draw near to the beginning of Lent we go again, as we do year after year to the mountaintop with Jesus. The gospel for this morning tells us of the day Jesus leads his disciples up a mountain.

I have never climbed the really high mountains—but I have climbed enough clefts to know that this business of mountain climbing is not easy and it is not always someplace many want to go. But you see Jesus was forever making us go places with him that nobody much wanted to go.

In biblical language mountains are places people talk about a lot. You remember the Psalmist saying: “*I look to the mountain from which my strength comes.*” Moses went up the mountains to be with God. You see, mountains can be good, quiet, restorative places for Sabbath, for retreat, rest, and renewal. The ministerial pace has been so hectic for Jesus and His disciples in the last eight chapters of Luke. It is time now to head for the hills—to reflect and to be alone.

Sometimes we have to get away from all the frantic activity and the messiness of life to center ourselves and regain perspective. There are people I know who go every year for a two-week retreat to a monastic retreat of silence, meditation, and reflection in order to get a renewed look at their lives.

Well, as you know, high places become excellent look-out points to get a better perspective of life, ourselves, and God. Who of us does not have reflective moments when we see pictures of our earth taken by astronauts and satellites from space? We all of a sudden realize this life is not all about “*just me.*” When we climb mountains we also get a new perspective from that different vantage point. When I lived just south of Centralia I would go rent an airplane at the Centralia airport and take a flight over the area that encompassed the two small towns and the farms owned by church members. It was helpful for me to get a new vision of that part of the world I was living in.

But here, on this mountain, we read about this morning, everything changes. The disciples’ solitude is intruded upon by two dead people. If Peter hoped to “*find himself*” on this mountain, forget it. Instead, he is discovered by the two great figures of the faith, the law and the prophets, Moses, and Elijah. There is a stunning, transfiguring vision, and an inspired speech. Peter, now jolted full awake, listens in on the conversation between Jesus and the patriarchs.

This is Sunday, a day when many people worship. The scripture lesson for today shows us Christian worship as good as it gets. In fact, take this encounter as a description of what we want at every service — talk to the dead, conversation that is law-prophet-gospel determined, with vision, and a response. We, who do so much talking, fall silent, recipients of revelation. The baptismal voice from Luke 3:22 again speaks through the parted curtains of eternity, just in

case we missed it the first time, at Jesus' baptism. This time the voice says, *"This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him"* (Lk 9:35).

In a gospel like Luke that specializes in allusion, story, and inference, it's great to again hear the voice be direct, indicative, and imperative – *This is my son. Hear him!*

So, this is the story of Jesus and the disciples. What does this have to do with us?

Today the disciples have gone up on a mountain. They've gone up there with Jesus who goes up there to pray. Have they gone up there to get away from it all? That's often the reason, I said, we give for vacation, retreats, and such. The demands of daily life can be so consuming. We need to get away. *"Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that takes me from a world of care,"* we sing.

But sometimes, in getting away from it all we are surprised when what was to be a retreat becomes engagement and encounter. I know somebody who took off from work extricated himself from the daily family responsibilities in order to walk the Appalachian Trail. He was on the trail for less than two weeks, came home saying it was one of the most disarming experiences of his life. He just couldn't take it. Why?

He said, *"I got out there alone, in the woods, no distractions, nobody out there but me and God. All the time in the world to think about all the things I usually avoid thinking about. I just about went crazy."*

The disciples have gone up on a mountain with Jesus to pray. If they think that prayer on the mountain is a good way to get away from it all, they are mistaken. When we pray, we are often in the habit of closing our eyes. We close our eyes, shutting out the world so that we can better focus on God.

On the mountain and in prayer the disciples have their eyes opened and they see who Jesus is. Their time on the mountain is for them a stunning moment of revelation. The veil is pulled back and they see the glory of Jesus as the Messiah.

We have come away from the events of our day in hopes of seeing the Lord. Only as we can take ourselves out of the daily routines of our lives and seek that which is beyond ourselves can we hope to experience the holy. We come to find Jesus.

But who is Jesus? That's a question on many of our minds every time we gather here for church. In here, in the quietness of this sanctuary, we come to pray. For about an hour every week we disengage from the cares of our weekday, work-a-day world. We come here hoping to meet Jesus. But who is Jesus?

Down through the centuries, scholars have sought him in the ancient texts. Years ago, archeologists found an inscription in Judea, a fragment of a carving from the Roman Era, saying something about *"Jesus, son of Joseph who . . ."* There was huge excitement. At last – a solid piece of historical evidence about Jesus. Then it was admitted that Jesus, was a very common name then and now. There were probably dozens of Jesus' sons of Josephs.

Scholars have launched the first, second, and even the third quest for the *historical Jesus*. Who is Jesus? Who is the real Jesus? They hope through historical spade-work to uncover who Jesus really was and is.

Even his own disciples asked in Mark's Gospel, *"Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?"* History refuses to yield much more solid historical evidence for this Jesus. What documentary evidence we have, we've had for a good while now. Still, there is not enough for a definitive, exhaustive historical answer for many to the question, *"Who is Jesus?"*

History does show conclusively that every quest for Jesus in modern times has tended to reveal more about the nature of the people who quest after Jesus than the nature of the One after whom they quest.

Thirty or so years ago, a group of scholars called “The Jesus Seminar” roamed about the country, garnering headlines like, “*Can We Really Know Anything about Jesus?*”

After their voting on the “*authentic*” words of Jesus (with their notorious system of red, pink, and gray beads), not much of Jesus was left to know. You see, the seminar folk clearly began with an assumption that, whoever the *real* Jesus is, he is someone quite unlike the Jesus who has been worshipped by the church through the centuries. The real Jesus produced by these professors’ looks suspiciously like the professors.

Yet for all the reservations we might have about the slapdash scholarship of the “*Jesus Seminar*,” perhaps we ought to be grateful that they have succeeded in putting the question, “*Who is Jesus?*” back on the table as the question for Christians.

Years ago, even Albert Schweitzer noted that the Jesus described in books about Jesus ends up looking a great deal like the authors of the books. Schweitzer said that those who attempted to render a life of Jesus looked down a dark well, hoping to see Jesus and down at the bottom saw only a reflected image of themselves. The Jesus we get, from our ruminations, is too often the Jesus we hoped to find before we began our quest to answer, “*Who is Jesus?*”

That may help us understand why in this month’s issue of the Illinois Baptist magazine there was a report on Belief about Scripture that reported that 29% of people in the survey said the Bible is mostly about morals, history, and moral precepts. 20% said it was the literal word of God and 49% said it is inspired but not to be taken literally. Again, we notice that we are asking questions to find out what people already think before getting to what Jesus says in the scriptures.

There’s got to be a distinction between the Jesus we want and the Jesus we need. The Jesus we need is the one who is able to stand against us in order to stand with us, the one who is enough like us to be with us, enough unlike us to redeem us. We need to be called forth out of our sin. We need forgiveness. We want approval, consolation, and affirmation, on our terms. We need forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption on God’s terms.

We are those who, like the prodigal son, have wandered into a far country. How can we find our way back home? If once we fall, do we fall forever? If we make a terrible mistake are we terribly fixed forever in our error? When we have received all the world has to offer only to have that prize crumble in our hands as dust, is there any way to start over, fresh, at the beginning? Is there a Jesus who is what we need?

The “*Jesus Seminar*” depicts Jesus as a wondering sage, full of wise sayings and good advice. I learned early as a preacher, that if the world would be saved with good advice, God would have sent us a seminar and not Jesus. I’ve seen so much advice bounce off of our heads on a Sunday. Well, don’t get me started. My point is we don’t need more advice. We need redemption.

Who is Jesus? Is he strong enough, resourceful enough, great enough for our need?

And so, this morning we are on the mountain. This is where the confrontation occurs between the Jesus we want and the Jesus we need. Jesus is dramatically transfigured before them. The cloud, the dazzling white garments are all biblical ways of describing a transcendent moment. For a moment on the mountain, the veil is pulled back and the disciples see the glory of Jesus.

“*This is my son, listen to him!*” says the voice. Moses and Elijah, both great figures of the faith of Israel, are transcended by this Jesus, God’s very son.

Peter, overcome by the glory of it all, wants to build booths, to stay up on the mountain forever. But this Jesus is on his way. The mountain is merely a moment on a journey. He is on his way to Jerusalem, or more specifically to

Calvary. There his once dazzling white robes will be soaked in blood. There, there will be no divine voice, no cloud, no dazzling light, and no *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down off the cross!"*

This time on the mountain is a detour from his main journey toward the cross. Thus, we have here a story about the peculiar way Jesus combines the glory with the shame, the mountaintop spiritual high with the cruel degradation of cross. The one revealed to be the *"Son of God"* is the crucified.

Who is Jesus? The voice says not only, *"This is my beloved son"* but also *"listen to him!"*

Are we ready to listen? We have reflected in other sermons on how difficult Jesus is to hear. Who are you? We say, *"You are a wondering philosopher."* Or *"You are a great moral example."* Or *"You are an inspired teacher."* Or *"You are my best friend."*

He says, *"I am the one who descends from the glory of the mountain to the degradation of the valley."*

On this Sunday we stand on the threshold of Lent, that forty-day resumed journey with Jesus to the cross. On the way, before the journey's end, there will be opposition, betrayal, resistance, cruelty, and death. Are we willing to listen to that Jesus for the next forty days? Are we willing to be led by him down from the glorious mountaintop to the valley of the shadow of death?

Who is Jesus? When he escapes from our grip, our pale, accommodated images of him, when he speaks, *"Follow me down into the valley,"* that is when we discover, if we're honest, that our problem with Jesus is greater than the "Jesus Seminar's" tame *"Who is Jesus?"* Our problem is that we have been to the mountaintop, we've heard the voice, we've seen the glory, but we are unsure if we have the guts to follow him from Gethsemane to Golgotha, from Bethlehem to Calvary.

I wanted Jesus to be the one who rescues me from evil. He turns out to be the one who leads us into confrontation with evil. *"Father, forgive,"* he says.

On the mountain, Jesus was transfigured. In a stunning moment of revelation, we see who he is. Yet in a curious way, on the mountain, two of his disciples were transfigured as well. Why do I say that? Well, they saw who they, as his followers, were. The glory we see in him is the glory that we are to reflect.

There is a character in one of Iris Murdoch's novels that says, *"Saints are those who are able to absorb evil without passing it on."* Just like Jesus. Someone else has said that saints are these who, like windows in many of our churches, some of the glory of God shines through. We come down from the mountain, having heard the voice, having seen the glory, changed, determined, amid the great cacophony of life to listen to Jesus. And that listening transforms us.

Our journey begins as we go to the mountain and are able to see who Jesus is in his transfiguration but then back down the mountain where with Judas we will betray him, with Peter we will deny him, with other disciples we will go back to fishing even before his three days in the tomb are completed.

But, if we stay at it will encounter the risen Christ in a breakfast served on the beach after fishing, with the stranger who we encounter on the Road to Emmaus, again with Peter as Jesus asks him three time, do you love me, and a way of redemption from the three times he denied him.

Will we again listen to him teach us through his spirit as we walks with us as we walk daily hoping we will be able to see that the God we saw on the mountain is the same God who is with us in the valley,

We see not only who Jesus is – God's very Son – but also who we are, his disciples who are to listen to him and follow wherever He may lead.

