

The Good Life: Astounded

*A sermon preached on Luke 9:28-43a on Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2025,
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“And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

I.

Today’s text is one filled with mystery. We can read the story of the transfiguration, but it cannot be fully explained. The events can be described, but even the descriptions contain so much mystery. The descriptions leave us with more questions than answers. Luke recounts that Jesus’ face changed appearance. Well, what exactly did that look like? His clothes became dazzling white. Are we talking Clorox bleached white or shining bright and radiant as the sun?

Then it is said they saw two men, notable characters from the biblical story—Moses and Elijah—talking with Jesus. Was this a vision? Was this a dream? Luke says the disciples were “weighed down” with sleep. In this sleepy haze, in that slightly confused, slightly sleepy state—maybe how some of you feel on Sunday morning—Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah about his departure. The word Luke uses is *exodus*. Jesus is talking about his exodus. This raises yet another question: *is Jesus about to deliver us like God delivered God’s people out of captivity in Egypt?*

Peter, bless his heart, always the one ready to roll up his sleeves and do something proposes an idea: let’s put up 3 tents on the mountain. Let’s camp here for a couple nights. Let’s preserve some of the mystery—see where it leads. This is pretty amazing, let’s see if we can stay here a little longer. But Luke is quick to point out that Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. Now to Peter’s credit, no one else seems to have any plan or any bright ideas. James and John over there, you seem pretty quiet.

And just when this story couldn’t get any more mysterious, when the disciples could not be any more astounded, a cloud comes in and covers them. Their speech cannot explain what is happening. This mystical encounter on the mountain is ineffable—it is beyond words. Now when a cloud comes along and covers them it’s also

invisible—it is beyond sight. And in the closing of their mouths and the shutting of their eyes, their ears are opened. A voice cries out from within the cloud: “*This is my Son, my Chosen, Listen to him!*” Mystery after mystery, then comes clarity: listen to him.

II.

Divine encounters in scripture often take place on mountains. Moses experiences God and receives the 10 commandments on the mountain.¹ The psalmist talks about lifting our eyes to the hills.² In Matthew’s gospel at least, Jesus’ most famous sermon is the Sermon on the Mount.³

In literature too, mountains occupy this space of mystery and otherness. Mountains are places where limits are tested and truths are revealed. Mountains offer perspective—for looking out at the world around you and also looking within. Perhaps that’s why so many of us love hiking or adorn our cars with stickers that say things like “I Love Mountains.” Even from our local peaks such as Hanging Rock or Pilot Mountain, you can look around at the piedmont region below and see this familiar area with new eyes, full of wonder.

A few years ago I was hiking with my wife, Charla, in the Appalachian mountains in western North Carolina. We set out for one of the grassy, bald areas at the summit, where we could see 360 degree views of the Appalachian mountains. But it was cloudy, misty day on the hike up the mountain with limited visibility. When we finally reached the summit we noticed that the Appalachian Trail cut through the grassy area. Just around that time, we noticed a bearded hiker who was thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. As our paths crossed, the clouds parted, the sun shone, and revealed a great rainbow stretching across the sky. We were all astounded by this glorious sight and this hiker was crying tears of joy. Tears were running all down his face.

It is not surprising that people encounter God on the mountain. God met Moses on a mountain. God meets Jesus and a small group of his disciples on a mountain.

¹ Exodus 34

² Psalm 121

³ Matthew 5-7; note that while mountains figure in Luke’s transfiguration narrative Jesus’ central sermon location in Luke is the plain or down in the valley.

This is probably because you don't end up on top of a mountain by *accident*. You have to prepare. You have to plan. You have to hike. Doing something *intentional* can open us up to the unexpected encounter with God. That's why often at places like Passport camp—where our kids and students are intentional about limiting distractions like cell phones and spending the week immersed in bible study, worship, and community—many experience what are often called “mountaintop experiences.” These encounters provide some new insight or new way of seeing and often provide a very close feeling of connection to God. When this happens you realize that something about Christian story changes you and hopefully stays with you when you eventually go back down the mountain.

III.

It would be lovely if life was all about these cinematic experiences—and yes tonight is Hollywood's big day of celebrating cinematic experiences, The Oscars. Life—however—doesn't often feel cinematic—for much of life is lived down in the valley, in the ordinary.

You could call this the law of spiritual gravity: “what goes up must come down.” You climb that mountain; you must climb back down. You go away for camp; you must go back home. You go on vacation; you have to go back to work. You worship in a sanctuary and then are sent back into the world. Navigating these transitions is one of the most challenging parts of the life of faith. When God feels close, then we can resonate with Julian of Norwich who said: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”⁴

When God feels distant, however, we can feel what St. John of the Cross calls the “dark night of the soul.”⁵ When Peter, James, and John came back down the mountain they kept silent and told no one of the things they had seen. But what they had seen had to affect *how* they were seeing. They saw God do great things on the mountain. Could that really happen down in the valley?

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157984/the-dark-night-of-the-soul>

“On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain...” Luke says a large crowd comes up to Jesus. And there is a crisis. A man begs Jesus to heal his son. His *only* son. The kid is experiencing seizures, he’s afflicted by a spirit, foaming at the mouth—and then the kid’s father tells Jesus “I begged your disciples to cast out this spirit, but they could not.” These disciples—including those 3 who went up the mountain—are the same disciples Luke has already told us about at the beginning of this same chapter. Jesus *“gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick... [The disciples] went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.”*

Now in this situation they fail. When they fail, it’s no surprise that Jesus is exasperated with them calling them a “faithless and perverse generation.” Hard words. Hard words right from the mouth of Jesus. If only we were less like them today. The amount of healing needed—and we can’t heal. I hear person after person say—there is so much to do: so much healing needed, so many hurting people, this political crisis, the climate crisis, the economic crisis, the mental health crisis. It feels like the world is falling apart. I hear followers of Jesus today say I don’t know what to do. I say this myself: I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say. It’s like we are caught in a cloud where we can’t see, and there is so much noise around us that leaves us speechless not knowing what to say. So much confusion around us and we do not know how to act.

I wonder what Jesus is saying today? What if we started by listening to him? Mystery after mystery, then comes clarity: listen to him. For in listening to Jesus we may be astounded at what we hear. Astounded at what he calls us to do.

IV.

Thomas Merton, the renowned Trappist Monk and writer describes his own mystical experience of connection with God and humanity. This experience did not happen in the confines of a cloistered monastery or on a mountaintop but in the bustling city center of Louisville, Kentucky. He writes: *In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed*

with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.

I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.⁶

Being astounded by God is not something reserved for the select few but for anyone who is willing to pay attention. Anyone who is willing to listen. The gate of heaven could be on the mountain—whether that be at church, or at Passport camp, or on a retreat, or in nature—but the fact is that life is lived in the valley. The everyday, the ordinary, the city, the farm, the suburbs and schools, workplaces and third places—the gate of heaven is there too. For **the gate of heaven is everywhere.**

V.

We have an ongoing debate within our household about Luke. Not the gospel writer, but Luke Skywalker in the newer Star Wars film *The Force Awakens*—where Luke is in self-imposed exile in solitude on a lonely island populated mostly with Porgs—these cute little puffin-like creatures, praying away his days.

Interestingly, the filming location is on an island off the coast of Ireland that once housed an ancient Christian monastery. The debate in our household is whether Luke

⁶ Thomas Merton, excerpts from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Part Three, *The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air*, pp. 156-58, in old Image paperback edition

Skywalker should he have withdrawn to the island to live away his days as a mystical Jedi in solitude and serenity (my preferred option—the way of contemplation), or, whether he should help restore the balance in the force by encountering and overcoming the darkness directly (my wife’s preferred option—the way of action). It’s a fun debate, but the truth about the way of Christ is that the option is not *either/or*. It’s not about contemplation versus action. It’s what Richard Rohr and others have called “non-dual” thinking or what our own David Hull calls “ampersand faith.” Contemplation and action go together. The choice is not between the mountain of contemplation OR the valley of action—but in developing the spiritual rhythm of *LISTENING* - to the cries of God and the words of Jesus—but also in listening to the cries of our neighbors—particularly the vulnerable. And then acting. And then listening. And then acting. And then listening. And then acting. And then listening.

For the gate of heaven is everywhere. On the mountain. In the valley. and everywhere in between. Listening is where healing begins. “And all were astounded at the greatness of God.” Amen.