

What If You're One of the Other Nine?

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St. Andrew's Westridge

Growing up, when you got sick, you were stuck with daytime television. There was no Netflix, or DVR, or on demand anything. There was simply whatever happened to be on midday television. My favorite midday television show was "The Price is Right." Part math strategy, part oogling at the shiny objects of American consumerism, and part really, really happy people, "The Price is Right" also taught me to spay and neuter my pets.

One of the things for which the show is famous is the way new contestants were introduced. Over wide-angle panning shots of the live audience, the announcer would say, "Eddie Jergenson, come on down, you're the next contestant on The Price is Right." And to play, Eddie had to make his way from his seat, down to the game show floor, to much cheering and many high fives.

This may be a little bit irreligious, but I can't help but thinking of "Eddie Jergenson, come on down, you're the next contestant on The Price is Right," when I imagine the scene recounted in today's reading from Exodus. Picture a big, scanning shot of the people of Israel down at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the voice of God thundering, "Moses, Moses, come on up, you're the next contestant on "The Devouring Fire Is At the Top of the Mountain."

Now of course Moses wasn't randomly selected; he wasn't one of the live studio audience watching the divine presence on the top of the mountain. He was the leader of the people; but still, he gets called from the masses to go up to God. And this is how it naturally works; people with authority call those under them to come to them. Teachers say, "Come here" to students. When my kids are upstairs and I need to talk to them, I say, "Come here," rather than going there myself. So God says to Moses, "Come here." It's entirely appropriate.

But it's also entirely different from what Jesus, in the gospel story before us this morning, known as the Transfiguration, does with Peter, James and John. Jesus doesn't tell them, "Come here." He tells them, "Come with me." The gap between "come here" and "come with me" is really quite enormous. It's the same God — the one at the top of the mountain in the cloud and devouring fire with Moses, and the one leading Peter, James and John up the mountain, but it's the same God accessible to us in an entirely new way. It's God saying, "Come on, I'm taking you with me."

The Transfiguration is very much an Emmanuel passage. That word, Emmanuel, we tend to save it for Christmas-time when we recall the prophecy of Isaiah about Jesus from which it comes, but it means, quite simply, “God with us.” When we say Jesus is Emmanuel, we are saying that Jesus is “God with us,” Jesus is God saying, “Come on, I’m going to take you with me.”

This is great good news. The difference between these two stories is a perfect description of the difference between before-Jesus time and after-Jesus time. The difference between these two stories is the heart of the gospel.

We know that in Jesus, God is with us. But gosh, wouldn’t it be nice sometimes if God were with us *like this*. If we got to see the Son’s glory: the face radiant with light like the son, his clothes dazzlingly white, speaking with Moses and Elijah. Wouldn’t it be great if we could hear the Father’s booming voice from heaven just a little more often in our lives?

I think the church today is thirsty for a direct experience of God’s presence, some glimpse of the Transfiguration. But then I remember how in this story, when Jesus comes and says, “I’m taking you with me,” he says it to only three of the apostles. Peter, James, and John. There are nine other apostles.

What if you’re one of the other nine?

I want to show you three things about the Transfiguration, and really about all such mountaintop experiences of God, three things that that matter whether gifted with the experience at the top of the mountain or left with the other nine at the bottom.

We need to remember — whether we’re wishing for them or reflecting upon having had them — that such experiences are never public enough, never long enough, and never strong enough.

First, these sorts of experiences are never public enough. Peter, James and John are a small, small group. Jesus is certainly not live streaming this to all his Facebook followers. There is a sense in which God’s glory is always reserved and private — God’s glory (as least until Christ’s coming again) is not a public spectacle for the world. Think about this: these three guys were with Jesus for his entire ministry, but their most amazing moment in God’s presence happened in a small group, alone, at the top of a mountain, for a relatively short period of time, and they weren’t allowed to talk about it.

We need to recognize this; to expect and to look for God in small moments, especially in small groups; not in grand, public spectacles.

The seventeenth century scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal was an absolute genius. He published his first mathematical proof (relating to conic sections) at the

age of 16, developed a mechanical calculator, studied vacuums, and atmospheric pressure. He also was a brilliant theologian and contributed deep insights even though his only published work was a series of fragmentary thoughts titled the "Pensees." But the most important moment in his life, which shaped his entire understanding of himself and who God was, came on November 23, 1654, from 10:30 pm to just after midnight, while he was alone. He wrote down his recollection of it, which began "Fire! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob...certainty, certainly, heartfelt joy and peace...Jesus Christ", and sewed it into his clothing so it would be close to him all the rest of his life. The rest of humanity only discovered it because he died, and someone went rifling through his clothes. His most precious moment with God was entirely private.

The Transfiguration wasn't entirely private. It was shared among three apostles. There is a repeated Old Testament principle that it takes two or three witnesses to establish something as fact.¹ A single witness could not establish any point of evidence. Peter, James and John comprise the two or three. Jesus took with him enough people to make their testimony about what happened trustworthy. So the Transfiguration was public enough to be established as trustworthy, but that was it. Such experiences, even when shared, are never public enough.

Second, experiences of God's glory are never long enough. Moses' experience, maybe, was the exception. Moses was up there forty days, and it was six days before God even spoke a word. But for the disciples, this all happened so fast. They got to the top, and then they saw it.

And what did Peter want to do? Peter wanted to stay there; let's build tents for everyone, he says, so we can stay here. Because this is great, and I don't want this to end. And in fact, it was in the very moment that Peter tried to capture the moment last that the moment came to its climactic end, with the very voice of God the Father coming out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And after that, all is quiet, Moses and Elijah disappear, and it's just Jesus and the disciples on the top of the mountain.

Maybe the voice was coming anyway, but I can't help but notice that the very moment Peter stepped out of the experience and tried to capture it is the very moment the experience slipped out of his grasp.

My own most powerful experience of God's presence happened in St. Peter's at Rome. I've told a fuller account of it in other places, and I'm sure I will again, but, like I'm sure the Transfiguration was for Peter, James, and John, it is a moment I return to in my memory again and again. And one of the things about it is that it at once felt very long, and yet also very short. And oh how I wished it didn't have to end. I definitely would have wrestled with some tent poles if I could have made it last longer. Such moments are never long enough.

And they're never public enough. Finally, the third thing, they are never strong enough. Before this story ends, we'll hear Peter — who heard the voice of God booming out of the cloud at the top of the mountain — not just deny that he knows who Jesus is, but deny knowing Jesus at all.

Here's the thing about the Transfiguration. What the disciples were supposed to learn from this is not that God was with them at the top of the mountain. What they were supposed to learn was that God was with them at the bottom of the mountain. What you and I are to learn from our mountain top experiences too is that God is with us at the bottom of the mountain, in our day to day life.

Jesus, down there at the bottom of the mountain with those disciples, led them through trials, feedings, hearings, pain, preaching, joy, and ultimately his own suffering and death. What the Transfiguration is about is showing them that they were as close to the Son of God down at the bottom doing all that stuff as they were at the top, enthralled by the rapturous vision.

It's just that divine glory is hidden; it's veiled in the person of Christ. I don't know about you, but sometimes, down here at the bottom of things, God's glory seems a little veiled too. We can't see it. Sometimes, even when, like Peter, we have some great moment with God in the past, we can be overcome by the hiddenness of God in the world. The vision alone is never strong enough. Peter didn't end up faring any better than the other nine, even though he got to go up to the top.

Still, I've always felt a little bad for the other nine. Even knowing that Transfiguration itself isn't a panacea for doubt and that it doesn't clear every confusion about the purposes of God, even knowing that such visions are never public enough, never long enough, and never strong enough... still. You know?

I can't say exactly why the other nine didn't get to come, any more than I can say why you had an experience of God your sister didn't; or why your friend had this powerful vision of Christ when you've never seen so much as a shadow.

But, I want to close by pointing out this. At that moment when Peter speaks up, and sort of breaks the spell, engendering the booming divine voice in response, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased," then there is what I'd call the purpose close of the whole transfiguration. "Listen to him!"

The divine voice didn't say, "Be impressed," or "Say Alleluia." The divine voice gave us something to do. To listen. To the three disciples huddled up there on the mountain, Jesus then said, "Get up, don't be afraid." So they got up, and stopped being in terror at the holy moment. And then they went down the mountain, and followed Jesus.

So listen to him. Take the next step to which Jesus is calling you, and then see where he leads you. I bet, somewhere along the way, you'll see some amazing things. Maybe even some Transfiguration sorts of things. But if you do, even though it will be a great gift, it probably won't public enough, long enough, or strong enough.

But most of all, remember this. Remember not that God isn't at the top of the mountain...this isn't a "Andrew Van Kirk, you're the next contestant, come on up!" God is at the bottom of the mountain. He's as close to us down here as he could possibly be. Let us listen to him. Amen.

1. see Deut 19:15 [↩](#)