



Down from the Mountain
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-43a
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 27, 2022)

Robert Lee Dodd served as the head football coach at Georgia Tech from 1945 to 1966. In one of his games, his team was leading 7-6 with just a minute to go. He instructed his quarterback not to pass the ball under any conditions. He said, “Whatever you do, hold on to that football; do not pass the ball.”

In the next ten or fifteen seconds of play, they moved the ball down the field to within ten yards of the opposing team’s goal line. As the quarterback began to execute the next play, with the seconds ticking away, he just couldn’t resist, and he threw a pass. As it often happens, the pass was intercepted by a player on the other team. This opponent rushed toward the Georgia Tech goal line. The entire team had given up the chase – except the quarterback who had thrown the pass. He had continued to chase his opponent and somehow was able to tackle him. The ball was fumbled, and the quarterback recovered the ball.

Georgia Tech won the game 7-6. After the game, the losing coach said to Coach Dodd: “I will never understand how that quarterback was able to do what he did.” Dodd explained: “Well, it’s actually very simple – your man was running for a touchdown; my man was running for his life.”

Motivation is the key.

For the disciples of Jesus the motivation is life eternal with him. That is what we call the Kingdom of God. Our focus should always be on him, his glory, his mercy, his wisdom, his words, his presence. When we lose track of that, we need reminders.

The mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration is, according to the Synoptic Gospels, one such reminder. It was so powerful that it dazzled and impressed the disciples. They were awed, puzzled, and, at the same time, frustrated. The event was so overwhelmingly beautiful that they couldn’t comprehend it. They were seeing Jesus’ brilliant glory, but what did it mean? Peter didn’t know what to say, yet he felt the urge to say something that sounded somewhat coherent and intelligent. His flabbergasted remark, “It is good that we are here” must be the greatest understatement in the Bible. Sure, why not build three dwelling places one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, and spend the rest of their lives contemplating that beautiful spectacle? When one is in heaven, does it make any sense to leave?

Luke tells us that on coming down the mountain, the disciples put the experience aside (v. 36 they “told no one”) until they were able to make sense of it after the resurrection of Jesus.

But before we get too much ahead of ourselves, we should look at what today’s Scriptures invite us to consider.

In Exodus 34, Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai with the two tablets of the Law. We are told that “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” In a sermon, Bishop Oscar Romero once said: “When we leave worship, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt. Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong, to face the world’s difficulties.”

Because of his shining face, all the people were afraid to come near Moses. Yet, he called them closer and reported to them all the commandments of the Lord.

The fact that his face shone conveyed the utter brilliance of the presence of God. That’s why the people were afraid to come closer. It was most probably an important lesson for them to learn, given what they had done not too long ago. This was the second time that Moses came down from Mt. Sinai. A few chapters earlier, the Bible tells us that he had received a first set of tablets of stone from the Lord (Exodus 31:18) but he had smashed those tablets in anger at the foot of the mountain when he realized that the people of Israel had cast themselves a shiny golden calf to which they bowed in worship (Ex 32).

Now, after having prayed on behalf of the people, he returns from the holy mountain with a new set of tablets written by the finger of God and containing the Ten Commandments.

It is Moses, the giver of the Law, who together with Elijah, representing the prophets, appeared in that mountaintop experience talking to Jesus. This had happened eight days after Jesus had alerted his disciples of his impending arrest, death, and resurrection. Obviously, the eighth day is in itself a symbolic reference to the first day of the week, the day of his (eventual) resurrection.

Luke tells us that the transfiguration happens while Jesus is praying. Danish theologian, poet, and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard wondered if the function of prayer is not to change God but rather to change the one who prays.

For weeks, we’ve caught hints and glimpses of the holy in Jesus’s early ministry. A dove descending from the heavens. Water becoming fine wine. A fishing net nearly bursting from a miraculous catch. But today, we see Jesus in his unveiled glory. That should be enough to assure us of his divinity, yet we don’t know what to do with it. What is it? Can we trust it? How would we react if we experienced that in our prayer? Would we be that different than Peter?

How is our prayer opening us up to the divine mystery? Are we approaching the holy One with humility and trust? Do we go to the Giver of life with our long list of needs the same way we go to an ATM machine or do we let the divine Spirit take hold of us? How are we going to worship when we are enveloped in the brilliant light of Christ? What are we going to do when his divine identity is revealed?

We will misuse the power of prayer unless we come to God in total humility and poverty of spirit, unless we understand this: loved, redeemed, and forgiven, we walk by faith growing in the trust of the continued presence of our living God-in, with, and for-us. Our journey of faith is not finished. We are not done, yet.

In fact, in this gospel passage, Jesus embodies the “now and not yet” of our faith. This event provides insight into who Jesus is. He is both transformed, and completely Jesus. He is divine and totally human. He is in conversation with the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). In this way Jesus gives us a glimpse of the glory yet to be, when the law and the prophets are fulfilled,

and our hope is affirmed. It's evocative of Martin Luther's famous quote, "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

It's the glory of Jesus' divinity that the event of the transfiguration points at. In his presence we are left in awe. We learn to adore and to worship him, the Beloved Son and Chosen One, whom God commands us to listen to and to do what he says.¹ In him there is bliss, joy, and peace.

In his glorious and brilliant presence, in reflective and silent prayer, and in conversation with him, we learn to make sense of the words he had spoken to his disciples eight days earlier; words of rejection, death, and resurrection that his disciples will experience along with him. The transfiguration of Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the conversation about Jesus' imminent "exodus" (better translated "deliverance") in Jerusalem directs us to the freedom and joy of resurrected life and nudges us on; it motivates us on when we are paralyzed in fear and stuck in self-doubt and hopelessness. The vision of the transfiguration is a shot of hope in the arms of the faithful.

But that hope, that faith, that openness to the divine needs to be exercised in daily life. The descent from the mountain to the valley forces us to seek God in the midst of the mundane and at the service of others. God is not only found in mystical experiences but also in the joys and pains of humanity and in the diligent execution of chores and activities performed in love.

In her blog, [Journey with Jesus](#), Debbie Thomas writes: "In its worst iteration, mountaintop Christianity is addictive, leading us to spend our days pursuing a "high" we conflate with spiritual success. When we don't experience that high, we feel empty, unloved, angry, or bored. Meanwhile, we don't notice the ever-present God in whom we actually live and move and have our being. Desperate for the mountain, we miss the God of the valley, the conference room, the pharmacy, the school yard. Worshiping the extraordinary doesn't make for a healthy faith."

What Peter and the rest of the disciples learned upon the descent from the mountain is that the experience of the transfiguration in prayer is in service to the mission of the Church. Keeping the transfiguration in mind, the disciples discover that, as Thomas astutely explains, "the compassionate heart of God is most powerfully revealed amidst the broken, the sinful, the suffering, and the despairing. The kingdom of God shines most brightly against the backdrop of the parent who grieves, the child who cries, the "demons" who oppress, and the disciples who try but fail to manufacture the holy."

It's easy to find the glory of God in that which is bright, beautiful, stirring, awe inspiring, and peaceful. We are tempted to seek and rest in that, and at the same time we tend to avoid and deny the validity of the mundane, the routine, the hard, and the painful. But that's what we find at the bottom of the mountain: deep sorrow, demonic powers, and unanswered prayers. Of course, we'd like to stay on the top of the mountain but can we follow Jesus to the bottom?

The transfiguration is another epiphany of the divine; it captures for us a vision of our life in God to come. Even when everything else we count on disappears, Jesus remains – Jesus alone.

¹ John 2:51 has the same words spoken by Mary at Cana, continuing perhaps his theme of the Word made flesh.

May we find hope for life in the valley as we pray in earnest: Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.