

*February 28, 2021*  
*Second Sunday of Lent*  
*Mark 9:2-10*

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

### **Background**

The transfiguration of Jesus is based on the belief that gods can change into different forms. Some schools of mysticism believe that humans and animals can also change form. Movies like the Lord of the Rings trilogy and Harry Potter contain contemporary expressions of this understanding. In the Jewish tradition, the righteous will take on a new heavenly form. Many people hope that their heavenly body will be different than the one that they now have on earth. In the text here, Jesus is transfigured not in the sense of taking on a totally new form, but in the sense that the way he appeared to the disciples is dramatically altered.

The fact that Peter, James, and John are present and witness this event makes it an historical event, not one that takes place only in the spiritual world. Nor is it a vision or dream of some moment in the future when the fullness of God's presence will be revealed. Jesus is the only one who is changed, and he is the only one who enters into a dialogue with Moses and Elijah. But the disciples are participants in the event as it unfolds. They witness and participate in what takes place: they see a change in Jesus' appearance, they recognize Elijah and Moses, Peter addresses Jesus, they are overshadowed by the cloud, and they hear the voice from heaven speaking to them. What is taking place occurs in such a way that they can experience it and participate in it. But it is only Jesus who is transformed and engaged in dialogue with Moses and Elijah.

Mark's community would have recognized many of the elements as being similar to events from their religious heritage. Moses and Elijah each ascended a mountain and there encountered the presence of God. Both underwent a kind of transformation. When Moses returned with the tablets on which the commandments had been written, his face became so bright, after he had spoken with God, he had to cover it so that people could look at him. (Exodus 34:29-35) Elijah, when he died, was taken from earth in a flaming chariot. (2 Kings 2:11) For the people of the day, Moses and Elijah represented the law and the prophets, the whole of their religious tradition.

The cloud is another familiar image from the Hebrew scriptures that expressed the presence of God. For example: God spoke to Moses from a cloud; while in the desert a cloud led the people and would descend upon the tent whenever Moses entered to confer with God; a dark cloud totally enveloped



Church of the Transfiguration, Mt Tabor, Israel

the temple at its dedication so that the priests had to leave; and the Jews believed that when the Messiah returned the cloud would once again descend upon the temple.

Peter's suggestion that they build three tents on the mountain reflects the custom associated with the feast of Tabernacles, when the Jews remember a period of their history of living in tents as they wandered in the desert. By the time of Jesus, the feast not only celebrated an important aspect of their liberation from the slavery, but it also took on overtones of hope for a time when they would be liberated once again. Peter's suggestion that tents be built may be an expression of his hope that this time of final liberation might be what is signaled by the events taking place before him. However, Jesus' exhortation as they come down the mountain, to tell no one of the experience "except when the Son of Man has risen from the dead," reminds Peter that there will be no glory before Jesus' rejection and death. As Mark's community hears the description of Jesus' transfiguration, their own hopes for the future are also touched. Jesus' note of warning would help them maintain some hope as they hear Mark describe Jesus' rejection and death.

1. What is your experience of being on mountains? What do you recall about the time of year, who you were with, the journey to the top, the view, and how it felt?
2. How might the experience of the disciples be similar and different from your experience?
3. Why do you think climbing a mountain is used as an expression of going to encounter God?
4. Have you had experiences of God that have changed you? Do you talk about those experiences?
5. As you reflect on this gospel today, do you feel more kinship with Peter, James, and John, or with the disciples waiting for Jesus at the bottom?
6. Might this Lent be an invitation for you to climb the mountain? If so, do you have a sense you are climbing alone, or with others? Do you have any hope for what you might find? If you have been invited to climb, are you also invited to descend?
7. Is the focus of your Lenten journey more centered on you, your family, the church, all of God's people, creation, or some other aspect?
8. Can you talk to God honestly and openly about whatever arises in you from this gospel. and about what changed view you most long for at this point of your life?

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