

Lent is coming soon. In fact, it starts next week for us. That 40 day(ish) trek to the cross—it just doesn't sound so exciting. And it never does. We know what's coming. We know that we'll find ourselves carrying a cross at the end of it, and we don't want to get there. But it's inevitable—we know that too. And here, in this passage, the disciples and Jesus are feeling the imminence of his death. In Matthew chapter 16, the section just before this mountain-top scene, Jesus predicts his death. He makes his fate known to his disciples, so you can imagine that at this point they are feeling hopeless and helpless. They all know something bad is going to happen, there's darkness beginning to set in, so, as the gospel writer explains, Jesus decides to take three of his disciples with him up a mountain to find something a little brighter, so they might be fed a little light. There on the mountain, they experienced the transfiguration of Jesus. They saw the glory of God and found themselves in the midst of a raw connection between Jesus and God. The disciples know this crucifixion is coming, we know this death is coming, but Jesus says "Don't be afraid. Get up." We walk through this world, faced with darkness and hopelessness around every corner, but Jesus tells us not to be afraid. And we know not to be afraid because he lives in us. And when we allow him to live within us, we allow a transformation of ourselves and of those we encounter. We allow Jesus' light to fill our world.

As many of you know, I'm a passionate photographer. I claim to be professional, but I have a hard time explaining to others how the camera works and how you get what you want out of an image. But I can explain that photography, and art in general, is all about light. It's about how we capture that light and how that light plays on the surface of the things it falls on. It's about the contrast between light and dark, together they create depth. Total darkness, or total luminosity (a.k.a. using flash on auto) flattens everything. You have to have both to understand the true character of anything. We react to and respond to that reflection of light among the dark, because that reflection is what moves us.

Jesus must have known this. Jesus took his disciples, and they walked right into the glory of God. He knew where to go, in the middle of their darkness, to shine a little light and create a great depth to give a hopeful perspective to these men, and to himself. Light shined on the situation—unveiling the omnipotence of God and Jesus' divinity—and began a reaction. The response the disciples had to this experience had the potential of changing things—of changing the way they perceived their world and heavenly relationship and of changing the way they approached helping others find their way to do the same. They were to take this overwhelming wave of holy transcendence and run with it—make something of it. This encounter was theirs to, at least, find strength to endure what was to come. No matter how far into this world of heavy baggage we are, into this world that has the ability to break us, we are never too far away from the redemptive power of God.

God shows up when we least expect it, in ways sometimes too extraordinary to comprehend. In this story, the disciples walk right into the presence of God—right into the middle of God's power. They knew they were walking into a holy moment, for sure, but I can definitely say they didn't expect to find Moses and Elijah there. And I'm guessing they didn't expect to be so reassured in the middle of being scared of their rabbi's death.

This text, just like the one in Exodus, is a little hard to understand and accept, because our factually-based human minds find it a bit unsettling—Moses and Elijah and all. Truth is, we shouldn't find ourselves limiting what sacred text may recount because the power of God transcends all boundaries that our world imposes on our understanding. Still, if this account is hard to read and swallow from the pages of an ancient text, I can't imagine what the fully-human disciples thought there in that moment. And I have a hard time believing that the only response they had was Peter's desire to build three dwellings. Actually, no matter how out-of-place Peter's request seems to us, I have to give him credit. "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." If I were on that mountain with Jesus and suddenly hanging out with Moses and Elijah, and if I could form words, they probably would have nothing to do with figuring out how to preserve that moment. No, I'm pretty sure there would be a couple expletives coming out of my mouth. So even though Peter's proposal seems a little odd, I can understand having inappropriate blurtings. Peter has this great plan of freezing this moment in time as best as he can, because they didn't have any cameras back then, wanting to build a house or temple or altar to honor what has happened here. But God interrupts. God doesn't want to stand for it any longer. We can't create these great, moving situations. We can try to, but it's only God that can really pull us up on the mountain for a transformation. And God returns the focus on the event: "This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well-pleased. Listen to him!" Then the disciples fall to their faces. God says focus, see what's happening, be present in this moment and try to live in this power. Do something with this passion that you've collected here and are feeling now. In a few days, or months, or years, don't just find yourself reminiscing. God reminded the disciples that it was Jesus' way that they had to follow, not their own.

How do you experience something like the transfiguration of Jesus and the glowing sign of his divinity and then have to come down off of that mountain, ordered to not tell anyone what you've seen until a little later on? We are familiar with the power of mountain-top experiences. We feel the high of being around God's people and doing God's work, but are we ever fully transformed by those experiences?

Mountain top experiences have a huge impact on us, but we tend to come down off of the mountain all too quickly—way before much of anything can come of it. James, Peter and John come down off of the mountain after this happening, after experiencing the holiness of God, and find themselves in a situation where a healing needs to happen. Jesus is the only one who could heal the boy possessed by a demon. And it really bothers these disciples that they couldn't. They had just been in the presence of Moses and Elijah and Jesus and God, and their faith, down in the real world, was too small, Jesus says. They came down off of the mountain too quickly. They were too quickly influenced by earthly situations and earthly problems. When we come down off of the mountain, we have to remember what we've been taught up there on the mountain. We may not be physically transfigured, but our perspective will change, and so we'll see the trials of the world in new and different ways. And we should remember that, no matter how unfamiliar the situation may seem, we have been given the appropriate tools to handle it even when our faith falters.

We can't create these experiences for ourselves. And even in our wildest dreams, it would have been hard for us to think-up this one. Only God could create that situation. Not even the church can create experiences such as these for anyone. We go on mission trips, with hopes and dreams of changing the world for someone else, but we all know that you come back from those times with a

deeper appreciation for yourself and for your world and for your God—those people and those places helped and changed you in a way you never could have planned to do for them. God only, creates the times when we find ourselves most transformed. It's probably in a time when we least expect it. And it's going to mostly likely be around people we would least expect to find ourselves with. God creates the opportunity for change, and we see it and feel it, but it's up to us to do something with those sights and sounds and feelings that strike a chord within us. We can't just live there and simmer in that mountain-top high and expect that alone to be enough to rejuvenate our faith. Our static in the midst of God's movement works against the strength that we could be given that would allow us to embrace and accomplish the call God has presented to each of us. We have to jump. We have to run with it. We have to do something.

I sometimes like to think of God as a momma bird—I have an admiration for birds. God is the momma bird that pushes her babies out of the nest but never stops watching over them. God is the momma bird that guides her babies out of the nest, out of that comfortable place beneath her wings, and into the air. As children of God, we then have a choice. We can either free-fall and end-up right back where we started from—on the ground. Or we can flap. We can flap as hard as we possibly can and lean into those talents she has given us and fly. We become fully ourselves and live in our true home when we let God move us.

So we are reminded to lean into the light. Because if we allow ourselves to be moved, if we leave space for grace, even in our most desperate of days, we could find ourselves on the mountain, in the middle of God's greatness and glowing in the light of Jesus.