



“Reclaiming Wonder & Awe”

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The gospel reading from Luke (and similar accounts in Matthew and Mark) are perplexing, at best, if one needs a scientific explanation for how Jesus' followers could have seen him on a mountaintop with Moses and the prophet, Elijah, who lived 1250 and 1000 years before he did.

So, what do we do with stories like the Transfiguration? Shall we point to these and others like them and say, “They’re not true? In fact, the Bible’s not true, because stories like this don’t hold up to scientific scrutiny?”

We could. Many have. But perhaps there is another option.

Perhaps not every story in the Bible has to hold up to the test of scientific reasoning. We know, for example, that Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a true story, and yet we know that there is truth in the story. Thousands of people came to California during the Great Depression under circumstances similar to Steinbeck’s characters, and thousands of real people grappled with their same struggles. Some survived—even thrived—and some did not. This is the truth we know from the stories of so many early 20th Century Californians—even though we know that Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is an historical novel, not a biography.

So if you follow my argument that a Biblical story does not have to be scientifically true or historically accurate to convey truth, “What truth,” you may ask, “does the Transfiguration tell?”

II

The truth that the Transfiguration conveys in the Christian tradition is the message to Luke’s audience that Jesus was one in a long line of ancient prophets, like Moses and Elijah, to carry on “the family tradition.”

According to Luke, Peter figured out that something very significant was happening on that mountain—something meriting a celebration on par with the Feast of Booths, which

was the festival commemorating Israel's forty years in the wilderness and God's provision of manna and quail for their ancestors to eat.

Even though Jesus declined Peter's offer to make three booths, the fact that he sees the connection between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—and offers to throw a feast—is a crucial faith statement for him, and for other Jewish Christians to whom Luke's gospel was directed. Peter acknowledged by his actions that Jesus was the Messiah, and Luke repeats this same faith statement to his Jewish Christian audience by telling this story the way he did.

Further along in the Transfiguration story, we learn that a cloud overshadowed the mountaintop, and that the disciples were terrified. Finally a voice breaks through the fog and repeats the words heard first at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

So the Transfiguration serves as a literary device telegraphing that Jesus is the Messiah. But that is not all. The story also serves as an important metaphor describing an important milestone in Jesus' faith journey, and the faith journeys of his followers, in that it signifies the start of his formal ministry and the beginning of the end—the beginning of the more challenging part of his earthly mission that ends at Golgatha.

The significance of the Transfiguration story for Peter, John, and James is that they finally understood in that moment that Jesus was way more than a faith healer, and way more than a wise teacher. He was the Messiah whom the Hebrew prophets had anticipated, and whom they had waited for.

As we learn through the Lenten narratives—from the Temptations to the trial and crucifixion—being the Messiah wasn't all sunshine and roses, and yet there were literally and figuratively some mountaintop experiences like the Transfiguration in Jesus' life, when for him, and for those near and dear to him, there were significant moments of clarity about his connection to those who had gone before him, and about his mission and purpose in life—moments that words could barely describe, even for those who were with him.

III

Perhaps now we see the historic significance of the Transfiguration, and how it fits into Jesus' biography. But what, you may ask, does the Transfiguration have to do with us?

None of us were there on that mountaintop with Jesus, and from our 21st Century vantage the Transfiguration seems more like an episode from *Star Trek* than a scene from our modern lives. Or maybe not. Maybe it isn't so surreal after all.

Consider, for a moment, that the Transfiguration is not some distant story that may or may not be grounded in historical fact. Consider, for a moment, that the Transfiguration is a metaphor for significant events that we all experience at certain points along our

faith journeys. Consider for a moment, that the Transfiguration is a metaphor for the kind of “mountaintop” experiences that we all encounter, at least a few times, in our lives.

Ponder for a moment what mountaintop experiences you may recall.

To encourage your reflection, I’ll share a few examples from my faith journey. I’ll share these—not because they are better than yours—but to prompt your reflection. And if you’re so inclined, share one or two with someone else today—maybe before you leave the Sanctuary, or during coffee hour, or perhaps through a phone call or email to someone special today.

So here goes. Here are few mountaintop experiences from my spiritual journey to prompt your reflections.

The thought occurs to me that I had a lot of mountaintop experiences as a child, and that perhaps this was my most formative spiritual time of all so far in life. I don’t believe that I’m unique in this way. I think that children on the whole are more open to the work of the Spirit and more aware of spiritual experiences than youth and adults.

As children, we are at that age of wonder and awe that precedes the need to seek a reasoned explanation for everything we encounter. British pedagogue Edward Robinson refers to this period of human life as “Original Vision.” He says that unless something terrible happens to us in early life, human beings are born with and hardwired to be deeply spiritual creatures.¹

Perhaps you remember, as I do, moments in childhood when you were transported to a higher spiritual plane while lying in the grass flying a kite, climbing trees in the woods, making snow angels in the snow drifts, squishing your toes in the soft mud of a newly formed puddle following a spring rain, watching the sun shimmer over the water while swimming in a lake, or watching the stars come out one by one on a hot summer night?

As a teen, I came to associate “mountaintop experiences” with places where I felt accepted for who I was, not just because I was a good student or did well in sports, and in groups with others who shared common cause for the common good. Many of these mountaintop experiences occurred at church camp and on youth trips and at larger church gatherings. This is why I think it’s so important to send our Eden kids to camp and to events like General Synod and Regional and National Youth Events.

As a teen and young adult, I also came to associate mountaintop experiences with natural wonders such as literal mountains like the Appalachians, the Rockies, and the Alps; and with great bodies of water like the Great Lakes, Niagara Falls, and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

¹ Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood* (Seabury Press, 1983).

As an adult, some of my mountaintop experiences were a bit more intellectual. I was a pretty good student in high school, but found college and graduate school infinitely more interesting and inspiring than my earlier studies, as I edged my way deeper and deeper into the disciplines that were my heart's true calling—disciplines that were not taught in the public schools.

In more recent years, another mountaintop experience for me occurred in and around a place in central Bohemia called Tabor. This is a city named for Mt. Tabor in Israel, which is the place that the early church fathers associated with Christ's Transfiguration that is described in the synoptic gospels.

Stephanie and I traveled to Bohemia and Germany with my mother the summer before we moved to California. The trip was her big reward for going through knee replacement surgery. We told her that if she gutted out surgery and rehab, then she would be able to go with us to “walk where the ancestors had walked.”

It didn't take a tremendous amount of effort on that trip to imagine being surrounded by our ancestors as my mother rattled off the family genealogy, and fired off driving directions to the homes and farms where my grandmother's family had raised hogs, chickens, cabbage, and corn since the time of Adam and Eve.

The final example I'll share is a bit more personal. My best mountaintop experience—and I would hope for everyone—has been falling in love and making a home with my beloved Stephanie. I was relieved last night when I asked Stephanie what some of her mountaintop experiences had been in life, and she mentioned, without prompting, falling in love with me.

I say this knowing that not everyone has been blessed to have found someone special or to be living in a time or at least a faith community where they experience genuine affirmation and encouragement for their love and life together. For the fact that we have found each other, and have been buoyed up by your love and support these last seven plus (of our nearly 22) years together, we will be forever grateful.

IV

So I'll stop there. Now it's your turn.

What have been those mountaintop moments in your life? When have you experienced a deep sense of wonder and awe in your life?

Remember those occasions and dare to believe that the Transfiguration is real. It is not some ancient fairytale. We experience it whenever we are awakened to the holy in the ordinary.

Amen.