



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

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The Path to Transformation

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Exodus 24:12-18

¹² The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." ¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (NRSV)

Exodus 34:27-32

²⁷ The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. ²⁸ He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. ²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. (NRSV)

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (NRSV)

Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." ¹⁹ He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you are able! -- All things can be

done for the one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" ²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer." (NRSV)

Do you remember blowing soap bubbles? A summer afternoon in the backyard. Mom and Dad give you a little plastic bottle of soapy fluid and that odd little bubble wand. You blow a spectacular bubble and chase it across the yard as it dances away in the breeze. You want nothing so much as to grab the bubble and preserve it so your Mom can see its lightness, its roundness, its rainbows. What can you do?

Well, you can wonder at, delight in, and even savor the soap bubble; but the one thing you cannot do is grab the bubble and preserve it for your mom. No sooner will your hand close around the bubble than you will be holding nothing more than soapy fingers.

Soap bubbles, like butterflies flitting across a spring pasture, like fireflies winking on and off in a dark summer night, like the beating heart of first love are among the most beautiful mysteries of life, but they are inherently impossible to control and preserve. And what is true of these merely physical phenomena **seems** even more true of the ultimate mystery, the spiritual experience of God's presence.

This is precisely Peter's dilemma in today's Transfiguration reading. Peter has faithfully obeyed Jesus' call to leave his nets to follow his new master. He has dutifully hiked up and down the dusty roads of Galilee as Jesus taught and healed his way across the countryside. And now he has obediently joined James and John as Jesus summons them apart and alone for their mountain top experience. After a time of retreat and prayer they are overwhelmed by the

ultimate mystery: the spiritual experience of God's presence shining through Jesus the Christ.

What does Peter do? He does what we all would have done. What we all want to do with our own spiritual experiences. Peter tries to control and preserve the mystery. He says, "Rabbi it is good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." You can feel the joy and relief welling up in Peter's breast. No more days of doubt and confusion, no more hot and dusty roads, no more contentious, skeptical crowds. With the transcendent Christ, Moses and Elijah safely domesticated in their little booths, Peter could settle into eternal, blissful unity with God. When visitors happened to wander into his little mountain top "JesusLand," Peter would generously share the eternal truth of God safely shorn of mystery and doubt.¹

Of course, just as Peter grabs for the spiritual soap bubble, it bursts in his hand. Just as Peter is settling in for an eternity of clarity and certainty, God's cloud of infinite mystery rolls in, overshadowing the disciples while they hear God command: "This is my son the beloved. Listen to him!" Before Peter knew what had hit him, the experience was over and they were trudging back down the mountain with Jesus – back to a world of ambiguity, doubt and struggle.

So, what are we to make of Peter's mountain top experience? Was it a gracious gift of transforming power, or was it just a spiritual soap bubble? Was it an enduring epiphany that left Peter with a new trust in God's presence, or was it just a momentary wonder that left Peter with nothing more than slippery hands?

One of the most powerful and insightful treatments of this question was offered in 1519 by the great Italian Renaissance painter, Raphael.

[\[http://www.eyeconart.net/history/Renaissance/transfiguration.htm\]](http://www.eyeconart.net/history/Renaissance/transfiguration.htm) His painting of the Transfiguration was his greatest and last commission. Raphael poured his insight and artistry into an outline on the canvas before turning his full powers to the figure and face of Christ. Just as Raphael finished Christ's face he died, and members of his school filled in the balance of his outline.

To appreciate Raphael's insight into the Transfiguration, fold the sheet in half, separating the

upper scene from the lower scene. As you do, you can see that they are almost entirely different scenes. On the top we see the Transfiguration itself. A divinely radiant Jesus draws to life and fulfillment all the law, represented by Moses clutching his tablets on the left, and all the prophecies, represented by Elijah holding the book of prophecy on the right. It is a scene of awesome power and clarity. God's revelation overwhelms Peter, James and John who cower on the ground.

How different is the bottom scene, the world below the mountain top. Here Raphael depicts the event that immediately follows the Transfiguration in Mark's Gospel, the account of the epileptic boy the disciples failed to heal. While the transfigured Christ looks upward serenely, the child below looks up in awe. The panicky disciples gesture wildly as their healing efforts fail.

At first the scenes seem entirely separate, the significance of the mountain top experience seems worth little more than a bursting soap bubble to the boy and father below. But unfold the paper again and look at the seam of the fold. Do you see how the two scenes are joined? They are joined by two hands extending from the lower scene to the upper scene, both pointing to the transfigured Christ, the Christ whose power will prove more than sufficient to heal the stricken boy.

What are we to make of Peter's mountain top experience? To be sure, Peter had to leave behind any notion of controlling and preserving the unambiguous experience of God's presence in Christ. But he most assuredly did not come down the mountain empty handed, for he came down the trail bearing both memory and anticipation. Peter carried with him the indelible memory of actually experiencing God's grace, and he carried with him a foundation of hope for Christ's anticipated resurrection and return.

As Peter would preach years later, in a sermon preserved in Second Peter, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." And "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain" [Second Peter 1:16-18

Peter came down from his mountain top experience bearing an indelible memory and a foundation of hope. What about us? What are we to make of our own mountain top experiences? George Gallup has reported survey results that more than 85% of us have experienced mountain top events in our lives – however intermittent, however fragmentary. We have experienced moments when intimations of God's power and presence broke through the doubt and confusion of daily life. Bound by addiction we were freed by a higher power. Bugged down by depression we were lifted by Christ's assurance. Storm-tossed by anxiety we were calmed by Christ's peace. Lost in chaos we were led to a path we just knew was right for us. Ensnared in conflict we were untangled by a spirit of reconciliation. Heartsick over the suffering of a child, we were healed as we saw the child healed.

Like Peter, most of us probably hoped to remain on the certainty and security of our mountain top. But, like Peter, we learned that mountain top experiences are gifts of healing and empowerment but they are not permanent resting places. Mountain top experiences are not given to set up shrines and take up residence. They are given to strengthen us for the path back through the valley where other suffering children still await a word of hope from God. 2

Like Peter, we descend from our personal mountain top experiences bearing gifts of indelible memory and foundations of hope. We may reenter the valley of ambiguity and doubt, but we reenter transformed. For, like Peter, we have been eyewitnesses to the presence of a power beyond our human capacities; we have somehow heard a word of hope whispered into our hearts. And that changes everything. As Yale theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, "*I do not trust that death has been conquered, addictions broken, sins forgiven, marriages healed, mourners comforted because I know that Christ rose from the dead. I trust that Christ rose from the dead because I know death has been conquered, bonds of addiction broken, sins forgiven, marriages healed and mourners comforted. I've seen it.*"

Yes, you and I may again be threatened by snares of addiction, pangs of guilt, pain of conflict, or burdens of grief. But next time we will know where to look. With the men in Raphael's painting, we will point back to our Transfiguration event, back to our mountain top where we experienced first hand the invincible love of God in Christ. There we will find our own assurance and hope

in recalling that because Christ brought grace when we struggled before, Christ may now be trusted to bring grace again.

May our faith be as bold as the 15th century preacher Girolamo Savonarola who prayed as follows: Let us pray:

Lord, we pray not for tranquility nor that our tribulations may cease; we pray for your spirit and your love, that you grant us strength and grace to overcome adversity; through Jesus Christ.
Amen.

1 From CS Lewis, *The Business of Heaven: Daily Readings from CS Lewis* (Harper and Row, 1984) p.88:

“It seems to me that we often, almost sulkily, reject the good that God offers us because, at the moment, we expected some other good... At every level of our life—in our religious experience, in our gastronomic, erotic, aesthetic, and social experience—we are always harking back to some occasion which seemed to us to reach perfection, setting that up as a norm, and depreciating all other occasions by comparison. But these other occasions, I suspect, are often full of their own new blessing, if only we would lay ourselves open to it. God shows us a new facet of the glory, and we refuse to long at it because we’re still looking at the old one. And of course we don’t get that. You can’t, at the twentieth reading, get again the experience of reading Lycidas for the first time. But what you can get can be in its own way as good.”

2 From CS Lewis, *The Business of Heaven: Daily Readings from CS Lewis* (Harper and Row, 1984) p.89:

“Many religious people lament that the first fervors of their conversion have died away... they may even try by pitiful efforts of will to revive what now seem to have been the golden days. But were those fervors... ever intended to last?...these golden moments of the past, which are so tormenting if we erect them into a norm, are entirely nourishing, wholesome, and enchanting if we are content to accept them for what they are, for memories. Properly bedded down in a past which we do not miserably try to conjure back, they will send up exquisite growths. Leave the bulbs alone, and the new flowers will come up. Grub them up and hope, by fondling and sniffing, to get last year’s blooms, and you will get nothing. ‘unless a seed die...’”

3 United Methodist Hymnal #531