

## Transfiguration A 2026 Matthew 17:1-9

I'm glad that the Scouts are with us today for Transfiguration, because I know Scouts are experts in mountain top experiences in general and setting up tents on mountains in particular. 25 years ago, on a backpacking trip that is still memorable to me for all the wrong reasons, my hiking party ran into some trouble on the trail above Seven Springs when the tiny one person backpacking tent that I had packed—for myself—was, no surprise, insufficient shelter for three people, the other two having refused to bring a tent because they were determined to sleep out under the stars...which that night looked and felt an awful lot like a gentle, steady rain. Graciously the Scout troop that was also camping on that ridge came to the rescue with ropes and tarps and we survived that night with mostly dry gear, if slightly dampened spirits. In many and various ways, God shows up on mountains. I have colleagues who roll their eyes when someone claims that they feel as close to God on a mountain top—or beach, or fly fishing river, or even golf course—as inside a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. But as a camper, hiker, backpacker, skier, I've always experienced the Divine on literal mountain tops, and I'm not the only one. In many world cultures, including the cultures that produced our holy scriptures, mountains are sacred spaces, dwelling places of the gods, places where the veil between the physical world and spiritual world is thin: Mount Olympus—the one in Greece and the one in Washington State—Everest, Kilimanjaro, Denali, and in our tradition, Sinai-Horeb, Nebo, Carmel, Hermon, Zion...human beings have sought God on the mountaintops forever.

The story of the transfiguration is a little weird—Jesus' appearance is supernaturally transfigured, his face literally changes, and he becomes all bright and shiny—weird! But strange as that is, we should not be surprised to find Moses and Elijah up there on the mountain with him. Moses received God's call to free the slaves from Pharaoh and God's law to govern the people of Israel on a mountain. Elijah survived a windstorm, a fire, and an earthquake to stand in the presence of God on a mountain. We don't know what Jesus may have told his inner circle of disciples to prepare them for this trip, but even without advanced warning, Peter, James, and John should have expected something supernatural to happen up on that mountain.

Peter earns an unflattering, if accurate reputation for goofing up almost every situation where he is named in the gospels. But in this case, Peter's response to the appearance of Moses and Elijah—and Jesus' altered appearance—makes perfect sense. *Lord, it is good for us to be here...* and he's right! They are in the presence of God and of God's faithful servants up on that mountain. *It is good for them to be there, which is why Jesus brought them along. I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.* This shows some insight on Peter's part, because presumably Moses and Elijah were not wearing name tags. There were no photographs in history books for them to be recognized on sight. Yet either from overhearing the

content of their conversation or just from having studied the stories of scripture, Peter knows who is visiting with Jesus. And since when Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Law from God he was up there 40 days and 40 nights, and when Elijah escaped Ahab and Jezebel by running to the mountain of the Lord it took him 40 days and 40 nights, Peter comes to the logical conclusion that a couple of tents might be useful, because they might all be up there for a while.

It is good for them to be there—but they are not meant to stay. We don't know how much time passes between this scene in Matthew's gospel and Jesus' passion, but for us, on this last Sunday before Lent, we know that 40 days from now we'll be preparing to witness Jesus lifted up on another mountain—between two thieves on the cross on Mount Calvary. In a little more than 40 days we'll read about Jesus taking Peter, James, and John with him to pray before his arrest, where instead of being dazzled by the light of the Transfiguration, they three times fall asleep in the dark night of the garden. Neither Moses nor Elijah, nor Jesus nor the disciples, nor us, meet God on the mountain top so we can stay there; we get these glimpses of the Divine, but then we've got to go back down in the valley.

*This is my Son, the Beloved...Listen to him!* The Father speaks directly to the disciples, reminding them who Jesus is. They are, understandably, overcome with fear at being overshadowed by this bright cloud and hearing the voice of God, but what God says to them inspires both hope and courage for what is coming next: *This is my Son...* when they are with Jesus, they are in the power and presence of God. They don't have to stay on the mountain to be in the good place; wherever they go, back down in the valley and across the plain, up to Jerusalem, in the garden of Gethsemane, in the courtyard of the high priest, at the foot of the cross, in the room where they hid for fear of the authorities, and then back to the mountain in Galilee from which Jesus ascends—wherever they are, it is good for them to be there because Jesus, God incarnate, is with them.

If we are lucky, we'll get a few truly bright and shining mountain top moments in our lives—times when we more clearly see and experience the glory of God. But most of us will spend most of our lives on more mundane terrain. I read a book a few years ago on spirituality titled *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, and that's where most of us find ourselves, most of the time: navigating a life that doesn't dazzle like the Vegas strip. But Jesus touches our lives and says, *Get up and do not be afraid*, not because of what is or is not happening around us, but because he is with us. It's not the elevation that gets us to God; God came down to us and gives us endurance to walk any road, not under our own strength but because God walks it with us. It is good for us to be here—but thanks be to God who is with us where we most often are called to be—out there.