

“Seeing With Our Own Eyes”
Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21;
Matthew 17:1-9

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What do you do with the Transfiguration? It's not unusual to go up a mountain and have a wonderful experience up there. But I've never been up a mountain where I saw somebody transfigured. That experience is beyond most of us. Maybe some of you have had that kind of experience, but I never have.

Here we have Peter, James, and John with Jesus and all of a sudden they see him begin to shine like a light bulb or something. Then there are these two other guys there and somehow they know they are Moses and Elijah. If somebody told me this kind of story, I would be pretty hesitant to believe it and to trust that they were telling me the truth. What do we do with this kind of story?

It doesn't end there. Not only do they see Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus, this conference going on, but then God shows up and speaks into their experience. It's a pretty incredible story.

The Bible is full of these kinds of stories. We also heard the story of Moses going up on the mountain, his experiencing God, and being given the Ten Commandments to bring back and all that was involved in that. And that wasn't the only experience Moses had. He really started off with that burning bush. You could almost say the whole Exodus experience was an experience of God's being present in incredible ways.

Paul has his own story. He's going off to persecute the Christians and all of a sudden he falls off his horse, is blinded by the light, and hears the voice of Jesus. What do we do with all these stories?

I have my own story. When I was trying to decide whether I was going to become a minister, I was given an option by my company: go to Pennsylvania or find another job. I had to decide if that was what I wanted my career to be. We got some friends together and we talked for a while and then we prayed together. In that moment of prayer I didn't see a light and I didn't hear a voice, but I had this experience of acceptance, of affirmation wash over me. Just before that all happened, Helen had said I would probably become a minister someday. Well, because of that, I decided that was a confirmation that it was what I should do. I felt God had been present and affirmed that calling. But what do you do with something like that? Do I believe what I felt?

We have this saying, “Seeing is believing.” Peter is trying to tell us about what he saw. The Gospel is trying to tell us about what they saw. Do we see and believe?

Sometimes these days, people try to tell us that some things, like our religious experiences, are just a brain state, and it's that brain state that causes the religious experience. Seeing is a brain state as well. It all happens in the brain. We get some

outside stuff that starts some things happening, but we put the image together in our brain. Just because we have a brain state doesn't mean it's not real.

Oftentimes there's some reason for that. Seeing isn't always all there is to things. We believe a lot of things that we don't really see but we have evidence for. Have any of you ever seen an atom? There are all kinds of things we believe that we don't really see. The flow of electricity--we see its effects, but we have a hard time seeing it. It's more than just "seeing is believing." It is something about what we experience that teaches us.

But I think a lot of people these days suggest that human experience isn't as valuable as I'm trying to say it is. In fact, some people say it's like a Trojan Horse. You know the story about the Trojan Horse. The Greeks and Troy were at war and the Greeks were besieging the town of Troy. The Greeks built this wooden horse and left it in front of the gate, burned all their tents, and appeared to sail away. The Trojans took the horse in. In the dead of night, the Greeks came back, and the people who were hiding inside the horse came out and let them in. So ever after, the idea of a Trojan Horse is something that isn't quite what it seems.

What I'm talking about is that there are a lot of things today that are told us, and we have to decide which ones are the Trojan Horses. We have to decide whether our experiences of God, for example, are real or not. We have to begin to decide whether the story that's given us in scripture is trustworthy. I wonder why it would be a Trojan Horse. It feels to me like if you think about what happens when people have religious experiences and how it changes their lives, it almost always is something that changes their lives for the greater good. It's not a centrifuge to cause problems.

There are a lot of things out there that are subterfuges or ploys that cause problems, but I don't believe faith is one of those. Faith is one of those things that is real. The question is, do we notice? I had that experience during prayer, and I could have written it off as a nice experience and not done anything with it. A lot of society would tell me to do just that because, you know, it's just a brain state. It's just an experience you had.

I think we all have experiences that society has told us to write off. Even the experience of beauty, we don't pay enough attention to. The experiences of awe, the moments of wonder, the moments of transfiguration in our lives--our society basically says they're not real. I don't know about you, but that experience was real to me. There are moments that are more real than anything else.

That's the first part of the story. We have to learn to trust the reality of God's presence with us, those moments of transfiguration, the way the story is given us through scripture, because you know what? We have to go back down into the valley. That's the rest of the story. It feels like this should be the end of the story, with Jesus up on the mountain turning bright and glorified, God coming and telling us who he is. But that's not the end of the story.

They walk back down into the valley, and the valley is not an easy place to go. If we think about where Jesus is going after this, he comes down to the valley and starts toward Jerusalem. And what awaits him in Jerusalem? He gets a nice day when he goes in. But then it all turns dark. As he confronts the powers that be, they don't like it. They arrest him. They convict him. They torture him. They kill him. The disciples are going to have to walk through all that. Was this moment of transfiguration enough for them? They struggle. They go and hide in an upper room. It takes a little more. It takes the resurrection and another encounter before it really comes home for them.

What Peter says in 1 Peter is that when we go back down into the valley, we have to remember those moments of grace, those moments of transfiguration, those moments of wonder, and how they lead us to trust in Christ, how they lead us to trust in what God does in scripture and how he shows us the way, to trust in the midst of darkness. Then, he says, as we pay attention to that, as we allow the Holy Spirit to work and to help us interpret scripture, as we hear God's word, we'll have a light in the darkness.

I don't know about you, but oftentimes these days it feels like the days are getting darker. It feels like a time of darkness to me, and I need that light. I need to remember those moments of transfiguration. I need to remember the grace of God that comes to be with us. I need to remember that there is something more real. There is beauty. There is grace. There is hope. God does want justice. We need that light in the darkness and it is as we trust God to be with us, the Holy Spirit to guide us, and Jesus to show us the way that we have a light in the darkness. Thank God! Amen.