

So this is the New Testament passage I least want to preach about. It's a difficult one to relate to our lives. This scene, with Jesus 'transfiguring' – glowing from his face and dazzling white from his garments – it's an image that makes me uncomfortable. Instead of Jesus, of God, this seems like a Hollywood production version of an angel. I invite you to Google the Transfiguration and see some of the paintings of this. Invariably, Jesus is airborne; dazzling white with Elijah and Moses on the ground looking up. And why did Jesus ask Peter, James and John to follow him if he is going to tell them not share what they've seen. And why do they offer to build three dwellings one for each of them. And then – a bright cloud overshadowing everything – affirming Jesus' identity, urging the disciples to listen to him.

I love Jesus and especially love his sayings, like the recent words in the book of Matthew – blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the world. I love his righteous anger in the temple where he overturns the tables of the money lenders. And I love his healing – not just the joy of having someone restored to wholeness, but also the tender compassion Jesus has for those who are suffering. I embrace the parables and, in my mind's eye, I even like to watch Jesus striding across the water. But this scene with Jesus radiating light, consorting with Elijah and Moses, somehow it repels rather than attracts. For secular people wanting to know about Jesus this is the last piece of scripture I'd want them to stumble upon. The dazzling white and the light from his face, the voice from the clouds– it's too much like a 19th century Gothic novel. I'd rather focus on the tender shepherd seeking his lost sheep.

And yet, this scripture, The Transfiguration, has been given a place of great importance. It is in Mark and Luke as well. So, it was significant to the Gospel writers. It has this pride of place in the Lectionary calendar. One of the gospel versions is read every year. It is always the last text of Epiphany and the precursor of Lent. It is clear we are supposed to get something from it.

One significant bit we might miss is the location, location, location. To a first century reader, being told that Jesus led some disciples up a high mountain would cause them to straighten up and pay attention. No one goes up a mountain to discuss the weather. Mountain tops are for announcements, for proclamations, commandments.

Both of those who meet Jesus there are strongly connected with mountains. Moses, you may remember, was a reluctant agent for God and a resentful leader of the people. When they are wandering in the desert, Moses is called to the mountaintop by God. Moses and God had had a very ongoing relationship - with God calming Moses and giving him help and suggestions. But the notion of meeting God face to face was something else. In Exodus we learn that "no one could see the face of God and live." Moses was aware of the significance of the mountain – something significant was up there. Whether he wanted to go or not, he went. We know that Moses does meet God. We know that Moses came down from the mountain with commandments. Moses went up that mountain brought us the Law.

Elijah was a prophet of the Lord during a drought when many including the King's foreign wife, Jezebel, had turned away from God and begun to worship Baal, a pagan God. Elijah a fierce prophet for God challenged Baal's prophets, all 450 of them, to sort of a showdown, which our God won hands down. Baal was disgraced and discredited. To make the humiliation complete Elijah killed all Baal's prophets, all 450 of them. Jezebel was not pleased and threatened similar treatment to Elijah. That threat and a web of despair that had engulfed Elijah sent him off to hide on Mount Horeb, in a cave. It is there that God promises to come him. Wild winds, huge rock slides, a terrifying earthquake and an all consuming fire all pass by - but Elijah does not find God in these dramatic events. He finds God in the sound of sheer silence. Elijah stands alongside Jesus as a prophet.

Despite all Jesus has said earlier in Matthew – about fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, about being on the side of the meek and the peacemakers, about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies – despite all this, he is still uncertain if the disciples understand who he is, so he invites them to witness this encounter. And God intervenes from the cloud surrounding the mountain repeating the words of Jesus' baptism. "This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased: listen to him." And the first thing Jesus says? "Get up and do not be afraid."

I've heard that before and still it difficult; even being told and told again, "Be not afraid." I still find myself living as if it's all on me. So, I've discovered that my discomfort with this passage says more about me than about the gospel writers or the lectionary folks. I don't know what to make of it, so I want to hide it away. I'm afraid that this thing, this whole thing - the Transfiguration- will make Jesus, will make God look silly. I find myself saying, "Oh, Jesus don't go too far. You don't want to drive people away. Let's keep it believable. I just want Jesus to be acceptable – to not make a scene'. It is like when my mother used to get up anywhere there was a band and a martini and sing. "Don't do it. Please." I would plead in my head – half in embarrassment and half in protection. I would lower my head and try to disappear. I wanted to separate myself from her as fast as humanly possible. That was until the end, when people would applaud and she would make her way back to our table and I could raise my head again. She was a good singer. But if I had my way no one would ever know it.

It's the same with Jesus on this mountain top. Like Peter and John and James – I'd like to build something to keep this transfigured Jesus in. Like them, sometimes the true glory of God, of Jesus is just too much for us to take in, too much for us to believe, so we'd like to put it aside. Couldn't we just leave it out of our lectionary readings? I can't explain it, so it would probably be best not to read it.

Boy, are we in trouble if all we know of God is what I can explain. Boy would we be in trouble if the disciples built shelters, boxes, booths, coffins for what they didn't understand and were afraid of.

It turns out that God doesn't need to be explained. Many parts of the Bible a preacher can 'unpack' – adding history, translating, and applying it, and that is helpful, enlightening. But there are also parts of the Bible which deliver God to us in whole cloth, beyond interpretation, where God is just there in the words, in the experience of others. I am not saying that we should not interact with and study the Bible. I am saying God is. I am saying, Jesus can come to us in dazzling white with prophets of old and God's affirmation from above – and that's the message. Scripture can bring us God dissected intellectually – it is incredible how many books have been written about scripture – some about just one word. And it is amazing how many people have been saved by grabbing Jesus' hand to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, never knowing, perhaps not caring what the Greek for shepherd is. The Transfiguration – God's glory spilling over onto Jesus, including Moses, including Elijah, showing us, not telling us, who God is. God is Glory, and earth, law and prophet, son and messiah, Father and creator. We can delve into that piece by piece. The Transfiguration, however, is leading us to an experience of God rather than a thought about God. Let some of that glory touch you – as Jesus touched his disciples that day. God is.