

Matthew 17:1-9: **Everything is Illuminated**

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Listen with me for God's word to us through these words from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 17 (CEB):

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Lord, it's good that we're here. If you want, I'll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!" Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead."

Everything is illuminated.

August 1989. I find myself on a cross-country road trip with five college friends, headed for a semester in the Oregon mountains. It's my first time venturing west of the Mississippi, and every bit of landscape captivates me:

an unbroken horizon in the plains states,  
Rocky Mountain peaks erupting out of the flatlands,  
the drama of high deserts and river canyons,  
moonscapes of rock formations.

The last morning of our journey, about 6:00am, I am behind the wheel. Everyone else in my car is asleep. Driving west on a mountain road near Klamath Falls, OR, I come around a corner and catch my breath. Steep forested hills circle a tiny lake. One ray of dawn sunlight pierces mist rising from the lake. That mist blazes, radiating pink light on the water and all the surrounding trees.

Everything is illuminated by that little pink cloud. I drive slower through this wonderland, mesmerized. This startling beauty feels like a gift just for me.

Three weeks earlier my father had died, tearing a hole in my life and my family. So at that moment I was a young man cracked open by grief and confusion and doubt. It's possible I was ready to assign meaning to anything. Maybe I was naïvely openhearted. Desperate for *any* sign of hope.

It's also possible that I received a moment of overwhelming grace, delivered by light streaming through God's beloved world.

That sunrise introduced me to southern Oregon. A couple hours later we pulled up to our destination, an interdisciplinary study program called the Oregon Extension. It's housed at a former logging camp in the tiny hamlet of Lincoln. Meeting folks and settling into my cabin, I still felt aglow and fuzzy from that sunrise moment. I don't think I told anyone about it.

Peter, James, and John also venture up a mountain and meet with brilliant light. One moment they're hiking with Jesus their friend, the teacher they've followed around for years. The next moment Jesus undergoes a metamorphosis in front of them! He blazes like the sun. Everything is illuminated, lit by the brightness of Jesus himself. The light of the world — it's not just a metaphor anymore.

As they try not to go blind, the three disciples, just regular people like us, make out two additional strangers on the mountaintop, having a nice chat with Jesus. These are not other day hikers, but the two superheroes of the Jewish faith: Moses who led the people out of Egypt and brought the law, and Elijah whose prophetic exploits were legendary. They've been dead for centuries, but if they're going to show up anywhere, why not a mountaintop? Moses, after all, *met God* on Mt. Sinai, while Elijah heard God's quiet voice on Mt. Horeb.

This impossible scene throws Peter, James, and John way out of their comfort zones. Peter, as usual when he's stressed, opens his mouth. You never know what might come out of him.

So Peter, God love him, offers to build three little tabernacles for Jesus and his guests. This might be an impulse of crazed hospitality: "Wow! It's great to see you all! Can I get you a drink!?" Or maybe Peter wants to preserve this moment of illumination: "Let's all just *stay right here*, shall we?" Or maybe he's temporarily insane, mind and mouth no longer connected. Because Peter the fisherman offers to build a house for Jesus the carpenter.<sup>1</sup> Peter does not know how to interpret what's happening to him.

Whatever Peter intended, he gets drowned out by another voice. This voice has spoken before in Matthew's gospel, back at Jesus' baptism. Now, speaking from a cloud shining like Jesus himself, the voice says, "This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!"

Jesus burns like a human torch. Ancient heroes of the faith drop by. A voice speaks straight out of the heavens. And the disciples...hit the deck. They are so fearfully impressed they try to hide in the dirt.

The next transformation changes the disciples themselves. Face down, uncomprehending, they despair until...Jesus, just Jesus, comes to each of them with a comforting human touch. "Get up," he says with a smile. "Don't be afraid."

If you struggle to make sense of that story, then you'll be good at empathizing with Peter, James, and John. Imagine living through the experience they had, your mind fully blown.

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<sup>1</sup> I heard Anna Carter Florence make this funny statement.

It's a weird story! An encounter with a transfigured Jesus goes beyond anything expected, beyond the rational, beyond the scientifically demonstrable. Thomas Jefferson excised the transfiguration story from his Bible, along with everything else he deemed miraculous or unreasonable. Many of us may do the same thing internally. We bracket certain biblical texts and say to ourselves, "Surely *that* couldn't have happened."

So think for a moment about the weird stories from your own life.

What event, what encounter can you not fully explain?

What mysterious thing has happened to you?

Did you ever live through a startling moment that made you see everything in a new light?

Have you experienced some kind of revelation that transformed your entire worldview?

If you've had any experience like that, do you talk about it?

Do you keep it as a private nugget of inspiration?

Or do you bracket it off and act like it never happened, maybe because you doubt your own experience?

How can any of us know whether to trust a spiritual experience?

How is an encounter with ultimate mystery different from a delusion?

This very week the campus of Asbury University, a Methodist school in Wilmore, is experiencing a spiritual revival that has lasted for ten days so far. How would we know if God is authentically present in such an event? One seminary student there posted that her experience of serious depression prompted her annoyance and jealousy about people being "revived" while *she* was in lament. But she decided to go see for herself what was happening. She says,

So I recruited a friend to come with me...so that I wouldn't change my mind at the last minute, and we went to the auditorium Thursday evening, sitting in the very last row of the balcony. At the beginning I spent most of my time just watching people, and I was genuinely moved to see how effortless it all was. People prayed and worshiped, alone and in groups, in their seats or at the altar rail. Musicians rotated on and off of the platform. Nothing felt forced, systematized, or manipulated.

This isn't a story about how I personally got floored by the Holy Spirit, got instantly healed, or joined the crowd of worshippers.... We sat in that back row, talked for an hour about theology and theodicy, prayed together, and then I went home. Not transformed but not exactly disappointed either.

What I will say is that I woke up the next morning feeling better. Not as if I'd never been depressed in the first place, but something was different.<sup>2</sup>

During seminary in New Jersey, I spent a summer as a chaplain intern at the Trenton Psychiatric Hospital. Every day patients told me vivid stories about their lives, often using miraculous religious imagery. Doing pastoral care with these children of God, I didn't know which stories to take seriously, which stories *not* to chalk up to mental illness.

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<sup>2</sup> Facebook post by Sarah Michel, 11 February 2023.

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02BPivpjG8pFegUsxZtbxwGR5YzmSoLjppbWVQJIFmyAwMFw9XAX2HwM8AQBesfq4l&id=1283804028](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02BPivpjG8pFegUsxZtbxwGR5YzmSoLjppbWVQJIFmyAwMFw9XAX2HwM8AQBesfq4l&id=1283804028)

My supervisor Dwight helped by making a distinction. He said an authentic spiritual experience typically sends the person back to their community in a new, inspiring way. The gift builds connection with others. A religious delusion, on the other hand, usually isolates that person, alienating them from other people. I saw plenty of patients for whom that seemed to hold true.

Peter, James, and John slowly would come to understand their mountaintop moment as authentic, transformative. Maybe that's why Jesus tells them not to talk about it until after his death and resurrection. Jesus already has warned his friends that he will have to die. So the disciples will need the rest of the Christ story before this transfiguration event will make any sense. Encountering Jesus shining with glory on a mountaintop also requires encountering Jesus bereft and suffering on a cross. You can't understand one without the other. The next time Matthew's gospel shows Jesus, Peter, James, and John together, they will be in the garden of Gethsemane.

God's pleasure rests precisely in this vulnerable Jesus who loves his friends and his enemies, even to the point of death. But Jesus also tells his friends that he will be raised from the dead. That is another mystery that will ring true only much later. Shining Jesus and bleeding Jesus are the same person, the crucified and resurrected one, the one God calls beloved Son.

So the little band of friends starts back down the mountain, sustained by this truth:  
 God prepares people in the transcendent encounters of our lives to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God's redemption.<sup>3</sup>

The transfiguration was a shot of divine affirmation for Jesus himself, equipping him for the torturous path ahead.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly the transfiguration experience blessed Peter, James, and John, too. I once heard a seminary professor, Anna Carter Florence, invite a group of regular church folks to encounter this transfiguration story more deeply. First she had us read poetry together to awaken our ears. Then Anna had us read — and act out! — this same scripture text. We explored the story's weirdness and surprises, and we listened especially to the verbs. The ending felt particularly powerful, when Jesus *came* to his terrified friends, *touched* them, and *said*, "Don't be afraid." At that point all of us in the room relaxed. We heard good news in those words.

What might be the point of this wild, illuminating story? Maybe "Jesus was transfigured so that we could be transformed."<sup>5</sup> That voice from heaven says, "Listen to him!" And what's the first thing Jesus says? "Get up. Don't be afraid." Those are the very words that can transform us.

Get up from where you've stumbled.  
 Don't be afraid to forgive.

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<sup>3</sup> Anschutz, Maryetta Madeleine. "Matthew 17:1-9: Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 1. p. 456.

<sup>4</sup> An insight by my colleague Lisa Hebacker, associate pastor at White Memorial Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>5</sup> I heard that sentence from Tom Andrews, Raleigh, NC.

Get up from your shame.  
    Don't be afraid of the truth.  
Get up and live.  
    Don't be afraid of death.  
Get up and walk with Jesus.  
    Don't be afraid of God.

For decades I've remembered that moment in Oregon when the world lit up for me. Only in retrospect can I articulate what happened to me then. That sunrise marked the beginning of a hard, transformative season. No one close to me had died before, so grief and shock took a big toll. Relationships felt arduous. Honesty about those things revealed my deeper struggle: I was angry. Angry that life was unsafe. Angry over my unfinished relationship with my dad. Angry with who I thought God was. Clearly I had a lot to work through.

Maybe that bright pink cloud primed me to see something new. Because in that broken time of life, I met God. Through the books I read that semester and the people I talked with, I began to glimpse a God more radically loving than I had ever imagined. A God who comes in Jesus with a human touch and a word, "Get up. Don't be afraid." I began to trust that Jesus reveals God is *for me. For you. For every one of God's creations.* I came home from Oregon not perfectly healed, but alive with God's hope. That hope still propels me all these years later. It's why I do this work.

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we all start walking into the vulnerability of Lent. Even after the heavenly light fades today, and we're walking down the mountain, we're still invited to see that in our joy or in our sorrow *everything* in this world is illuminated by the love of Jesus.

In the name of God, source of all light,  
and of Jesus Christ, embodied light,  
and of the Holy Spirit who shines in us.