

The sermon “On the Mountain: Seeing Clearly Before the Descent”

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From Matthew 17:1-9

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Every journey has a moment when you realize the road ahead is going to be harder than the road behind. Sometimes that realization comes quietly. Sometimes it comes with a diagnosis, a decision, or a loss. And sometimes—if we are paying attention—God meets us in that moment, not to remove the road, but to help us see clearly before we continue. That is what the Transfiguration is. Not an escape. Not a reward. It is a gift of clarity before the descent.

A Glimpse, Not a Destination

Matthew tells us that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. They do not go looking for glory; they are brought into it. This moment is given, not achieved. And suddenly, Jesus is transfigured before them. His face shines like the sun. His clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with him.

For a brief moment, everything becomes clear. This is who Jesus truly is. This is where the story has been headed all along. Moses and Elijah do not compete with Jesus; they witness to him. The Law and the Prophets converge, not in an idea, but in a person.

And notice this: Jesus does not explain what they are seeing. There is no sermon, no interpretation, no instruction. Sometimes God does not clarify our lives by giving us answers. Sometimes God clarifies our lives by showing us who is with us.

The Temptation to Stay

Peter, overwhelmed and well-meaning, responds as many of us would: “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three dwellings...” Peter wants to hold on to the moment, to preserve the clarity, to build something permanent around it. The mountain is not meant to be a home. It is meant to be a moment. We often want spiritual experiences to become destinations. God intends them as preparation.

The Cloud and the Voice

Before Peter can finish speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them—a sign of God’s holy presence—and a voice speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Not: *Understand everything that will happen*. Not: *Avoid the suffering ahead*. Simply: **Listen to him.**

Psalm 99 reminds us that this is how God has always worked. God spoke to Moses, to Aaron, to Samuel. The people were not always faithful—but God was. God remained faithful even when the people faltered. The Transfiguration is not about perfect discipleship. It is about a faithful God.

Overwhelmed—and Touched When the disciples hear the voice, they fall to the ground in fear. This is what holiness does when we encounter it honestly. It reminds us that God is not manageable, not predictable, not under our control. But then Jesus does something remarkable. He comes to them. He touches them. And he says, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” The holy God of Psalm 99 is not distant. This God draws near.

Only Jesus—and the Descent When the disciples look up, Moses is gone. Elijah is gone. The cloud has lifted. They see no one but Jesus—alone. And then, without ceremony, Jesus leads them back down the mountain. The vision ends. The calling does not. The Transfiguration does not cancel what lies ahead. It prepares them for it.

Why This Moment Matters Just before this passage, Jesus has begun to speak openly about suffering and death. Just after it, he will continue the journey toward Jerusalem. The disciples are given this glimpse not so they can stay on the mountain, but so they can survive what comes next. God gives clarity—not certainty. Light—but not the whole map. Enough—to keep going.

A Real-Life Witness to Clarity There is a modern story that echoes this truth powerfully. **Paul Kalanithi** was a neurosurgeon at Stanford—young, accomplished, newly married—when he was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer in his thirties. Later, he wrote about this experience in his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*. Early in his illness, Kalanithi describes sitting in a hospital room, looking at his own CT scans—the same kinds of images he had spent years interpreting for his patients. He knew exactly what he was seeing. In that moment, everything became clear. His old life was over. The future he had imagined was gone. The road ahead would involve suffering he could not control. And yet, he did not describe that moment as despair. He described it as **clarity**. He realized that the question before him was no longer how to cure the disease, but how to live meaningfully in the time that remained. He would keep practicing medicine as long as he could. He would love his wife well. He would tell the truth. He would become a father (to Cady). The scan did not save him. The clarity did not remove the descent. But it gave him direction. It gave him steadiness. Kalanithi later wrote that meaning does not come from certainty about the future, but from seeing clearly enough to take the next faithful step.



Dr. Paul Kalanithi and daughter Cady

For Us, Here and Now That is what happens on the mountain of Transfiguration. The disciples are not shown the future in detail. They are not spared the suffering ahead. They are given clarity

about who Jesus is—and that is enough. Most of us live in the valley, not on the mountain. We walk roads marked by uncertainty, grief, injustice, and fatigue. But sometimes—quietly, unexpectedly—God grants us a moment of clarity: a truth we cannot unsee, a calling we cannot ignore, a presence we cannot forget. Those moments may not last. But they are enough. Enough to endure. Enough to trust. Enough to keep following.

The God Who Goes with Us Psalm 99 proclaims that the Lord reigns, that God loves justice, that God remains faithful even when people falter. The Transfiguration shows us what that reign looks like. It looks like Jesus—walking down the mountain, heading toward suffering, choosing love over safety. This is the God we serve. This is the clarity we are given.

Closing As we stand on the edge of Lent, we do not carry certainty. We carry vision. We carry memory. We carry Jesus. And when the road ahead grows steep, we remember: We have seen who he is. We know who walks with us. And that is enough.
Amen.