

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ²and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁴Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us^[a] make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

⁵While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" ⁶And when the disciples heard *it*, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." ⁸When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Exodus 3:1-5

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush *was* not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn."

⁴So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!"

And he said, "Here I am."

⁵Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand *is* holy ground."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Shhh! Listen!”

“I can’t gaze straight at God. Just as a person has to look slightly to the side of a distant twinkling star to see it, so I have to let my sight glance off God in order to see God. The concept of a God who can create all the planets, galaxies, quasars, trees, and flowers suggests a glory that is too bright for direct viewing, a song of exultation too loud for unplugged ears”

This is a poem by Kristen Johnson Ingram called “Stand Still”.¹ I think we all know what she is trying to describe, using words, as far as words will go... an experience which is so sacred and holy, where the supernatural and the secular are meeting, where the Timeless is seemingly dipping into time... an experience where the only appropriate response is silence. The Celtic Christians call such an experience as being in the thin place, where the very fine veil, the gossamer thin membrane which separates heaven and earth is being lifted ever so slightly.

Maybe you can think of such an experience...when you yourself have looked in awe up into the heavens on a very dark night or peered through a telescope into one of the 100 billion galaxies that have been documented, when you’ve seen a spectacular sunrise...so often gracing the big skies of Texas, or perhaps it when the sun set over the clouds and its reds, oranges and golds flooded the earth. Maybe you’ve had such an experience when you’ve felt the power of a storm approaching and the smelled the ozone from lightning strikes filling the air, or when you were in the mountains, overwhelmed by the vastness of the vistas below you or at the seaside, undone by the persistence of crashing waves. Maybe it was a line of poetry or a piece of music or the nuzzle of a newborn baby in your neck which brought to you a place in your soul where you gasp and caught a glimpse of the mystery of God. (*pause*)

Well, one time, long ago, something like this happened to three friends of Jesus—Peter, James, and John---something that left them speechless, something they couldn’t begin to explain.² It was something so unusual, so unlikely, so mysterious, that afterward Jesus instructed them not to talk about it. It happened on Mt. Tabor, at the Eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, near the Sea of Galilee, probably sometime near the middle of Jesus’ ministry. The story goes that Jesus took these disciples up a mountain. Yes, a mountain and, as we’ve

¹ Kristen Johnson Ingram. “Stand Still” In: Weavings; Jan/Feb;2007 (Nashville, The Upper Room).

² John Buchanan. “Speechless”. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/021807.html>. (accessed 2-17-23).

mentioned before, mountains had always been special places for God and God's people. There, he let them witness his TRANSFIGURATION. Jesus' clothes became bright white, and he shone with a light that was not of this world. Moses and Elijah were there, and the disciples overheard them talking about, of all things, how his life would end.

Peter, James and John encountered the Lord in all his dazzling **DIVINE** glory, and Peter, so taken, proposed staying there. He thought that Jewish prophesy was being fulfilled and that the event should be prolonged.³ The words tumbled out of his mouth...and kept tumbling. He suggested that they should build three tent tabernacles, sanctuaries, in order to remain on the mountain.

Maybe when you've experienced that thin place, maybe you've wanted to make it last too. Maybe, like Peter, you wanted to just stay FOREVER and bask in God's glory. *I remember once being on a camping trip with my husband, our sons, and our dog, Sweetie. We'd arrived at Lake Whitney late at night and set up our little tent in the dark. It was Fall and while the day was warm, the night was already growing quite cold. We awoke at dawn to a thick, frosty fog. We got dressed in our sleeping bags as I recall and then crawled out of them to welcome the brisk day. I began to get the breakfast on the camp stove ready while Mike took the boys exploring on a hike.*

It was quiet, very quiet. I enjoyed the peace in solitude that I had by myself that morning. I recall the silence that was surrounding me, a silence that was almost deafening, if you know what I mean, only the sound of the sleet which was falling and then later the crackle of the bacon...no birds, no wind blowing, nothing. It was a sacred time, and I was filled with an awareness of God's indwelling me and in the nature around me. So very near. But what was also so wonderful was hearing the experience of the boys when they returned from their hike. "Mom, the snow geese were on the lake, and we could hear them, just quietly honking, honking. We couldn't see them because the fog was on the lake. We were very, very quiet for a long time, and then suddenly they flew up, and then we could see them go up out of the cloud. Oh, it

³ Nicholas Hardesty. <http://owensborocatholicradio.com/846/catholic-qa-33-what-are-booths-and-why-did-peter-want-to-build-them/> (accessed 2/24/17).

was so cool, Mom.” I knew they, like me, had experienced an awareness of God’s presence and they just wanted to capture it, to savor it, to stay in the moment, if they could have. (long pause)

Yes, some experiences we want to savor because they are so obviously sacred, so full of mystery. Reason does not suffice. Presbyterian theologian, Luke Timothy Johnson, writes, *“There is a mystery at the heart of the world, a mystery that does not yield to direct examination, that refuses to be measured or manipulated, yet suggests its presence in every single thing that we can feel and taste and see.”*⁴ That mystery is due our God, brothers and sisters, beyond our comprehension and *“if we think we understand God, it is not,”* as St. Augustine says, *“God we understand.”*⁵

While Peter was talking, talking, proposing his building project, a bright cloud descended on them. It overshadowed them and they heard a voice saying, *“This is my Beloved Son; listen to him!”* Yes, they were told to be still, to stop talking, to shhh and listen...to respond in the only appropriate way they really could...in awe and silence. *John Buchanan says, that “the most profound silence is so often the moment of God’s most profound presence.”* *“It’s when,”* he says, *“silence can be so elequent.”*⁶ I think that’s the day the disciples must have learned that. Even though they couldn’t begin to explain it, they learned to stop talking and listen for the divine mystery in their world that day.⁷

(long pause) And then it was all over. Jesus said to his disciples, *“Arise and do not be afraid”*, and he led them back down the mountain. Just as on our camping trip, the sun burnt away the fog, we ate our breakfast, and made our experiences a memory, Jesus, Peter, James and John descended back into the messiness of life. They entered back into the world where there’s confusion, violence and pain, where there is injustice and fear, where there is hunger and thirst. He led them back into the community to shine love into sinful, lost and broken lives. In fact, when Jesus and his disciples arrived at their return destination, they were confronted by a man, desperate for healing for his demon-possessed son. Rev. Calum MacLeod summarizes,

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson. *“Creed. What Christians Believe and Why it Matters.”* (New York: Doubleday Religion; 2004), 68.

⁵ St. Augustine. [https://lifeondoverbeach.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/saint-augustine-on-understanding-god/\(accessed 2/3/18\)](https://lifeondoverbeach.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/saint-augustine-on-understanding-god/(accessed%202/3/18)).

⁶ John Buchanan.

⁷ John Buchanan.

