

The Gospels are alive, my friends. We might think that because we read the same lessons every year or every three years that they would become tired – rather old hat, so to speak. But no! They constantly reveal new insights – new revelations – every time we read them.

I read something entirely new when I began to study the Gospel for this week. Peter and John and James went up the mountain to pray with Jesus. And they witnessed something extraordinary, something beyond their imaginations. Jesus's appearance changed before their eyes. And then, then they saw two men with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah. They were talking together with the Lord. This should be all too familiar to us, but I don't recall ever reading that they were talking together and certainly I don't remember ever hearing before what they were talking about. The Gospel became all new to me when I read – seemingly for the first time – that Moses and Elijah also appeared in their glory – the glory that is associated with the risen and heavenly life. Moses, the law-giver, and Elijah, the prophet, were speaking with Jesus about his exodus – his departure that would take place in Jerusalem – his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Moses and Elijah – what did they share with Jesus? Elijah's mysterious disappearance in Transjordan and his follower's inability to recover his body led to the belief that Elijah had been taken to heaven without dying.<sup>1</sup> In the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy, Moses's burial by God in a place unknown to humans was understood in some later Jewish traditions to mean that God had taken Moses to heaven.<sup>2</sup> There would also be two men in dazzling clothes who would appear to the women at the resurrection<sup>3</sup> and two men would appear at Jesus's ascension.<sup>4</sup> Like much of our traditions their deaths were divinely veiled as if they were dreaming, but God often spoke in dreams and visions.

The three disciples were sleepy – very sleepy. It was as though they to were already in a cloud – in a fog – fighting off sleep – perhaps drifting between sleep and consciousness – chasing dreams. Then they are confronted with something unbelievable. They rubbed their eyes, unsure of what they had seen. The light was so bright.

Once while driving back from Banff on the old highway we actually were driving in the clouds. And the light shining through the clouds was especially bright when it broke through. I had to put on my sunglasses. I imagine this is the light that broke from the clouds when Jesus and Moses and Elijah were revealed at the transfiguration. Jesus's three best friends must have been startled by that intense light. As Jesus was praying "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."<sup>5</sup> In Matthew Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."<sup>6</sup> In Mark he was "transfigured before them,<sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."<sup>7</sup>

Yes, the transfiguration appears in all three synoptic Gospels. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. So, really... I should have heard this before. But this new distinction between Mark and Matthew's Gospels and Luke's is truly revelatory to me. The topic of the conversation between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus was not disclosed, except here in Luke. I feel as though I had never before had ears to hear... that I had heard but had never listened.

How often are our thoughts somewhere else when we read so that we do not hear. Or we hear but we do not listen. This was the case with James, John, and Peter. They themselves were the witnesses to the conversation on the mountaintop about Jesus's departure in Jerusalem, and yet they did not listen, did they? Jesus had told them what the future held for him, and they refused to listen. And then seeing him in his glory with the ancient figures who represented the Law and the Prophets and hearing them speak of Jesus's leaving, they still did not understand. Within moments they are ready to build booths for Moses and Elijah and our Lord. Peter wanted to memorialize their

mountaintop experience rather than follow Jesus to his exodus in Jerusalem. They wanted to keep Jesus – in a box. They would do anything but go to Jerusalem where Jesus would leave them. They could not – and we cannot – stop time and live in the radiance of that moment. Discipleship means following. It involves going on. The three disciples were not yet ready to witness to who Jesus was. They and we might be in awe of the glory of the transfiguration, but only after experiencing the cross, the resurrection, and with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit were they able to witness to what God had done in Jesus. And so it is for us.

Up on that mountaintop what began as prayer grew into a profound religious experience. Here was an opportunity for Jesus and his three most trusted brothers in faith to go apart from the others and the world to just be with God and to pray. And it became a day like none of us has experienced. As the cloud enveloped them a voice from out of the cloud said: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” we heard similar words at Jesus’s baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”<sup>8</sup> But here we are told to “Listen to him!” Do we listen? Do we really listen?

Always, always Jesus prays before (and often after) a life-changing event. And prayer is the setting of true revelation. Here on the mountaintop he is transfigured; he is seen “in his glory” as are Moses and Elijah. Glory was a sign of divine presence. I imagine that Jesus’s, Moses’s, and Elijah’s faces all three shone in their glory, and their clothing was all dazzling white as is the color of heavenly garments. But then Jesus is revealed to be God’s chosen one to whom we are to listen.

Peter, James, and John heard, but did they listen? They did not speak of Jesus’s transfiguration. Why? Was it a vision? Could they believe their eyes? Could they trust their ears since Luke gives us this new revelation about the content of Jesus’s conversation with Moses and Elijah? What would the other disciples think? Clearly they did not understand what had taken place. But at some point in their future they would grasp the meaning of that day on the mountain. People who have had an ecstatic

experience – like the three disciples had on the mountaintop – are loath to talk about their experiences. Why? It could be because most other people who have not had such an experience will think that they are crazy! There is another response from some who have not had but who have longed for a face-to-face with the Lord. They often feel as though God has short-changed them because they have not had such an experience.

Do we have visions in our day? We may be with our three best friends – as Jesus was with Peter, John, and James – or with our children or grandchildren when something of import happens to us. I have had two visions in my life. They were real. My ecstatic experiences felt at the time very very real. I was thirteen for that first encounter with the glory of Christ. I was in church praying and waiting for my surrogate mother to come and check how I had set up the altar for a weekday communion service. The second time, I was a mother with both my children in the car. I was driving 1500 km to bury my father when I pulled over to pray for strength and for safety on our trip.

From everything I have heard – and listened to – about such face-to-face occasions of grace like I have had, my visions were very like those that many others have experienced. And I have shared the details of those two encounters with very few people over all these years. Why? Because most people did think I had lost my mind. And even more sadly, my sharing my story has caused some people pain, because they had longed for and prayed for a vision all their lives. One close friend was doubly hurt, because her mother had had a similar experience and then I had two. She so wanted to feel what we had felt, to be in the presence of Jesus, to know him more fully, to hear and to listen to him.

Both Moses and Elijah had had mountaintop visions.<sup>9</sup> In their conversation with Jesus they spoke about Jesus's exodus. Moses and Elijah – representing the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament – spoke about those things that would take place in Jerusalem, Jesus's death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Then God identified who Jesus was and said to listen to him. Moses and Elijah left him alone, having transferred the responsibility of reshaping Israel to Jesus. Jesus had superseded the Law and the

Prophets. The promise of the law and the hope of the prophets was fulfilled in Jesus. God's plan for Jesus would lead to glory. God's glory – God's presence – divine presence – would come to us and remain with us forever.

May we listen with new ears to the Gospels. May we are to listen to Christ Jesus, so that we may fully experience and witness to God's presence in Jesus the Christ, always and everywhere.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Kings 2:1-12.

<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 34:6.

<sup>3</sup> See Luke 24:4.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 1:10.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:29.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 17:2.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:2-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 2:21-22.

<sup>9</sup> See Exodus 24:15-18 and I Kings 19:8-13.

<sup>10</sup> Insights for this sermon were drawn from:

*The Harper Collins Study Bible*, pp. 1976-1977.

*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, on Moses, pp. 918-919.

*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2, on Elijah, pp. 464-465.

*The People's New Testament Commentary*, pp. 215-216.

*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, pp. 204-208.