

Luke 9:28-43

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. ³⁷On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴²While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples,

Our hearts desire an encounter with the living God; it’s not enough to talk about God; we long to connect. This comes true for the disciples in today's text as they have just such an encounter.

Now, Luke gives us a clue that something big is about to happen because Jesus takes his leadership team up a mountain to pray. When Jesus goes off to pray, something significant will happen. They reach the top, and something powerful occurs. On this mountaintop, Jesus is no longer covered with dust and dirt from the climb; he is transformed. His face shines, and his clothes are now Clorox white. He changes before their very eyes.

This echoes the story of Moses, whose face would shine so brightly after an encounter with God that he would have to cover his face to meet with the Hebrew people. But unlike Moses, Jesus does not reflect God's glory; he reveals God's glory in himself.

Do you know someone who is deeply spiritual and has something about them that makes us feel like we are in a liminal space, for those places where the boundaries between the holy and the ordinary are pretty thin, and sometimes being with those people feels like an encounter with the holy? I'm not talking about the people who will tell us how spiritual they are. We know those folks, too. I am thinking of the ones if you asked them, they would not boast about their faithfulness but would humbly say they are no better than anyone else. Those who are ultra-faithful should not make us feel less; instead, they can inspire us to find our way to shine with God's glory.

Sometimes, I envy those who are deeply spiritual, but as Arthur Cochran, one of my seminary professors, said when I told him I wished I could be more spiritual like some of the other students, "Don't envy them, and don't try to be like other folks; develop your spirituality."

Well, Moses and Elijah show up on the mountain. They symbolize the law and the prophets, Jesus and the disciples' Scriptures, and they are there to talk of Jesus's departure. The word for departure is exodus. Jesus is going to exodus, leading people from the powers of sin and death to the promised land of faith, hope, love, and life.

But the sleepy disciples are not quite sure what's going on, and the power of these events overcomes them. They never get that Jesus is leading us to a new life that requires his passing through death. For them, it can't be because Jesus is God's chosen, and nothing can harm God's chosen one.

But Jesus sees himself as a servant of God who chooses to give his life to reveal that the power of God's love for us cannot be defeated even when humanity does its worst. Even a torturous cross, an instrument of state-sanctioned terror, cannot stop God from loving us. God transforms it into a tool used to reveal God's love.

Peter is unsure of what's happening, but that never stops him from talking. Don't just stand there; do something. Peter babbles, "Let me build dwelling places for you all," for it was around the time of the feast of booths when people constructed temporary shelters and lived in the fields, remembering the time they were wanderers in the wilderness after being freed from slavery in Egypt."

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah vanish as God declares from the cloud, “This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him!” What a powerful experience for them, to be in God's presence and know it!

This message that Jesus is God’s chosen and we are to listen to him is not just for Jesus, as it was at his baptism; this is for Peter, James, John, disciples everywhere, and you and me. Listen to Jesus, we are told. However, it takes the resurrection for them to hear what Jesus is truly saying.

Wow, the disciples went off to pray, and God shows up! It can happen; it happened to me. When I was in the compelling preaching project, we were asked to write a group sermon with about six other preachers. We were given a passage and a thirty-minute time limit. I was very frustrated because it was much faster than I was used to. It would take me more than thirty minutes to figure out where the text was going, and it was complicated by six other pastors, which meant we had to go from seven different sermons to one. But I got through it, barely.

Later, as the session drew close, we were asked to pray for each other. We would tell our partners what we needed, and they would offer a prayer. After my partner and I finished praying for each other Dr. Dee Stokes came over placed her hands on my shoulders and in a prayer, said, “You feel like you are too old and not good enough.”

I don’t know how she knew, but she was exactly right at that moment. I was still reeling from the seven-pastor sermon. She would tell me that God spoke to her, and she spoke God’s word to me. At that point, I broke down; she nailed my feelings: You are too old; you need to hang it up. In her prayer, she brought support, comfort, and assurance that I was not too old and could do this; God wasn’t done with me.

I felt God's presence in her insights, words, and touch. The Spirit showed up, and I felt the Spirit. I experienced God's real presence.

This past week, Miles was to attend a retreat, and the leader asked the family to write letters letting him know of our love for him. One of the things I told him I have shared with you before, but it is appropriate to repeat it. I was born again when he was born, to use biblical language. In the gift of Miles, I felt God’s real presence, and I really needed it at that moment.

It's that same feeling I get every time I sing “For all the Saints” and we come to verse

4 And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

It is the powerful assurance that I will be reunited one day with those I have lost, and they will be healthy and healed of any infirmities that plagued them. That verse makes me feel like I am in God's real presence. The only problem is that usually, I am leading worship as we sing it, and I can't dwell on that overpowering feeling. Like the disciples, it doesn't last long enough; it never does. I can't remain on the mountain.

Being in God's tangible presence is transforming. Many of us have had that experience, though sometimes we don't see it as such. I see it as when God seems so real and present, and we feel the power of love. Sometimes, it is mediated through another person; sometimes, it just comes.

Like Peter, I want to stay there with the power of the Holy Spirit surrounding me. But down the mountain, Jesus returns them to their teaching and healing ministry.

But the disciples kept silent and did not speak of those moments in God's presence on the mountain. You and I don't have to be that way. When the times are appropriate, we should speak our truth and tell of the power of our experience of the presence of the Living God. And if someone blesses us with the gift of telling their story, our task is to listen and receive what they say as a precious gift.

These times in God's presence are often called mountaintop experiences. They are times of theophany, a theological idea that means God is revealing God's very self. God shows up, and it is a blessing if we can be there, recognize it, and experience it.

Soon, we will move to the Lord's table, and as we discussed the other day in Bible Study, how is God present there? Some believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. On the other end of the spectrum, some believe bread and wine are just symbols. I trust that Jesus is present, but I don't worry about saying how. He is there.

That's why I have in my welcome to all people, "If you believe, if you want to believe, if you want to want to believe, come to the table, but just know you might experience the power of the real presence of Jesus." He promised to be there for us, and he keeps his promises.

But wherever we experience God's presence, when we pray, sing, serve, or commune, it empowers us to come down the mountain back to the rough and tumble of everyday living, where eggs cost too much and people are hurting in many ways. God blesses us to go out and be a blessing to others.

As Peter Mayer sings, God is loose in the world and will meet us there too. And we will encounter Christ's real presence as well. God is present for and with us on the mountaintops, on level plains, and in valleys.