

Re-Figuring Jesus

Luke 9: 28-36

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Luke 9:28-36 (NRSV)

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his [exodus], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now 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. 33 Just 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. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen;* listen to him!' 36 When 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.

If you climb a mountain for a closer encounter with God, you better be prepared for what you might see. Greg from Bozeman headed up a mountain for something big, K2, the second highest mountain peak in the world, and many say the toughest to climb. He was looking for something on that mountain, achievement, beauty, adventure, but was also looking for answers, like why his sister Christa died decades too young. Perhaps a closer encounter would provide some clarity, he thought. He and three others prepared for 70 days at a base camp, adjusting to the thin air and waiting for the weather to clear. And finally their moment had come. But as they dared toward the final ascent, word came that another climber fell and needed rescue, so Greg and the others had to turn their sights away from the peak above.

The rescue effort weakened and disoriented Greg. He became lost, and instead of arriving back at base camp, Greg stumbled on a small village built on a shelf jutting out from a canyon. The village had nothing, but gave everything they had to nurse this ER nurse Greg back to health and strength. As Greg slowly recovered, he contemplated his loss of a dream, and how in the world he would get home. That was when he stumbled on a group of children, huddled over a patch of bare ground, where a teacher was scratching their lessons with sticks in the dirt. As Greg stood dazed by the sight, a boy approached him boldly, and through broken translation managed to ask, "mister, would you build us a school?"¹ It was at that moment, Greg Mortenson attests, that his mountaintop experience had been transfigured into far more than he ever imagined. He went up a mountain to find God and answers, and God pushed him down the mountain and into a strange village that needed a school and its story told.

(You might know Greg Mortenson as the one who gave up his life at this moment, became the bestselling author of *Three Cups of Tea*, and founder of the Central Asia Institute, which has built more than 120 schools in rural Pakistan and Afghanistan, and served as a global ambassador for peace.)

On their way with Jesus to pray, Peter and John and James knew they were about to experience something BIG. After all, Jesus had singled the three of them out, this experience was already exclusive. Jesus took them up the mountain, ohhh, this is so BIBLICAL, up a mountain with a prophet-healer, there's gonna be god stuff going on up there! And Jesus was going up to pray. Now any follower of Jesus, at least as Luke tells the story, is gonna know that when Jesus prays, big things happen, doves drop out of the sky, disciples get called, miracles ensue, and who knows what would be in store this time. Perhaps that is why, when they got

¹ Greg Mortenson, *Three Cups of Tea*, Viking Press, 2006.

to the top of the mountain, Peter and John and James were WATCHING while Jesus was praying. They just knew there would be something to behold.

But they had no idea how AWESOME the sight would be. While they were “praying” with Jesus, sneaking peeks so as to not miss a miracle, they suddenly saw the appearance of Jesus’ FACE change, and suddenly he had on dazzling white clothes. Jesus was glowing just like the scriptures say Moses did! And then, wait a second, THERE’S MOSES! Wow, this was, like, BIBLICAL, and Jesus was in it. And Elijah too! It was like a Mount Rushmore of heaven, the Bible Stars were getting the band back together, and Peter and John and James had front row seats to the reunion tour!

Jesus gets thrust, in this mysterious moment, into heavenly company with Moses and Elijah. So not only had Jesus’ appearance changed, his context had changed on that mountain, with the company of the lawgiver, the liberator, the prophet, the messiah. And in this deeply theological moment, these figures were talking of Jesus’ exodus, to be accomplished in Jerusalem. Moses of course was the leader of the original exodus, escaping from bondage to pharaoh in Egypt, through the parted Red Sea, into the promised land. But here, Jesus was about to set God’s people free again, as says Barbara Brown Taylor, “only this time not from pharaoh, but from bondage to their own fear of sin and death.” Jesus would “approach the Red Sea of death and split it with a cross and lead his people through.”² This vision of Jesus was big and biblical, and of course it had to happen at a time on earth before cellphone cams.

Peter had trouble grasping this vision, it would seem. At a moment when Jesus entered the company of heaven to talk about his work of deliverance in Jerusalem, Peter said, Master, it is good for us to be HERE, on the mountaintop. Let’s make three dwellings, one for each of you, said Peter, which is what the Israelites would do for divine figures. Let’s make residence for you, sanctuary, places for us to revere and remember you. This is a special place and moment, let us preserve and honor and dwell in it. But Peter, the text goes on, did not know what he was saying.

And no sooner had he gotten the words out than a cloud overshadowed and overcame them. The cloud was a strong image in Israel of the presence of God, God would often appear in the form of a cloud above the people. But in this case, the cloud moved in on them, they were surrounded and enveloped by God. And then a voice from the cloud said to them, “this is my son, my chosen, listen to him!” And then when this voice had spoken, Jesus was there alone. The clouds, the heavenly figures, the voice, were gone, and only Jesus remained.

If you climb a mountain for a closer encounter with God, you better be prepared for what you might see. Peter was not prepared to see Jesus for who he is, sure he was big and cosmic and heavenly, but he wasn’t seeing the difference between the heavenly figures of divine history and the earthly figure of Jesus in the present moment. For Jesus had been born not from the clouds, but from a lowly woman in a stable, come as God made low, as the revelation that though God could remain in the heavens and on mountaintops, God had in Jesus Christ come down the mountain to the people, to you and to me and to every small illiterate and hungry village below, to show that THIS is the kind of God that God is.

And THIS God cannot be contained in any dwelling, or preserved on any mountaintop, or limited by any special moment in the now. God is on the loose, the very nature of God revealed in Jesus Christ is that God knows no boundaries, God comes to be with us as one of us, as if the purpose were for God to come down the mountain, so that maybe we’d start doing the same.

We come up to the mountain every week, that’s what this sanctuary is, a place for us to draw nearer to God, be focused, have an encounter if we’re lucky, be fed, but then I suspect you do as I do, and leave God here. But as we come here to encounter God, we should feel the tug on our arm each time, the tug felt by

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Dazzling Darkness,” *Christian Century*, February 4-11, 1998. pp. 1-5.

Peter and Greg Mortenson back down the mountain, into the villages and cities below. The exodus that Jesus leads us on is to Jerusalem, to battle the powers and principalities that stymie God's loving way, and to the cross, where we might all give up our life for the sake of the gospel. As we enter into the season of Lent this week, this text would ask us, you're prepared to climb the mountain to see Jesus do something amazing, but are we prepared to follow Jesus down the mountain? Are we prepared to devote our lives to serving the poor, loving others? And for those of us who are struggling, who remain in the cities and towns below, are you prepared to accept that Jesus is down in the valley with you? If you've accepted that God is distant in your life, are you prepared to be proven wrong?

As Jesus gets revealed with theological complexity and richness and depth, the voice of God wants to remind you, THIS is my son, my chosen, listen to him! This is not a God who stays on the mountaintop, this is a God who comes down the mountain to our places of pain and poverty, so that we might all be raised and restored and related as God intends. While we climb the mountain to witness the transfigured Christ in heavenly glory, the broken world struggles below. You can see Jesus on the mountaintop, but can you see Jesus in the depths and darkness we inhabit? Lovetta Conto could. Lovetta grew up a refugee of civil war in Liberia, in a camp with 47,000 other homeless Liberians. She spent most days with hunger pangs, so thirsty she would get up the courage to drink the smelly, contaminated water lying around even though she knew it would make her sick. These camps are no place for anyone, much less girls like Lovetta, who had to trade favors to avoid being beaten. But in the middle of a horrific childhood, something kept her gaze forward. She told everyone who would listen that she wanted to be a fashion designer, to which they'd laugh. You live in a refugee camp, they said, you think that's going to happen? But Lovetta claims she always pictured herself in a higher place, growing up like a beautiful flower out of a mud pit.

When she returned to the war-ravaged Liberia to an orphanage, Lovetta noticed that while food and water and hope were scarce, there was an abundance of used ammunition everywhere you looked. And so she picked up bullet shells, held them to a flame, and turned them into spectacular fine... JEWELRY. Today Lovetta's jewelry goes by the designer name "akawelle," which translated from her tribal language means, "also known as love." Lovetta found a way, at the bottom of the mountain, to know that there was more. "I believe that whatever you go through, there is always new life, a new beginning. So even a bullet that has killed someone can be the same one to help a new generation."³ Do you have eyes to see Jesus, the heavenly prince of peace, descended to change you and me and the whole world? Do you have eyes to see yourself in this God's story?

³ Lovetta Conto, Akawelle Jewelry Designs, <http://www.strongheartfellowship.org/akawelle/Designer.php>.