

Copyright February 27, 2022. Geist Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

**Title:** Who Is Changed?

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Luke 9:28-36](#)

**E-mail:** [Ryan Hazen](#)

[Watch the service.](#)



I am NOT a mountain climber. We have some mountain climbers in the congregation. In fact, a father/son duo from our congregation just returned from climbing in Argentina. I'm anxious to hear more about that expedition. I've only been close to being a mountain climber once and that was in 2015 at Philmont Scout Reservation in

New Mexico with our Boy Scout Troop. It was more of a hike in the mountains than mountain climbing but we hiked about 120 miles over 10 days. Basecamp at Philmont is at an elevation of 6,500 feet and we hiked up to Mount Baldy at 12,500 feet as a part of the trek. I must confess that another adult and I did not make it quite to the top of Baldy because we were drying clothes and packs and tents that day from two previous days of hiking in the rain. That was fun!

When I read a passage like today's scripture, I know that we're not getting the whole story. Even a one-and-done climber like me knows that Luke left out a critical part of the story – how did they get up and back down the mountain? At Philmont, I huffed and puffed barely making the weight requirements and carrying too much stuff in my pack and I thought I was going to die.

Many sacred texts speak of mountains as holy spaces where one might encounter the living God, and almost all of them speak of experiences once they are on the summit of those mountains. Take Moses for example. When God called Moses to the top of Mount Sinai, Exodus 19:20 says this, "the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up." (Exodus 19:20). Well, that was easy – Moses "went up." I bet Moses would like some editorial oversight about his trip to the top of the mountain that day because I'm sure it was a little harder than – "he went up." Of all those encounters with God on the mountaintop, none of them that I know about speak more than a whisper about how they got there. I haven't climbed much but I've done enough to know that there's more to it than our text lets on.

Today's story is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and it always pops up on this day on the church calendar. Today is the last Sunday before we begin the season of Lent – that time of preparation leading up to Easter. The Sunday before Lent is called "Transfiguration Sunday" because of this very story. Today we have before us Luke's account of the transfiguration – called that because the appearance of Jesus changes and becomes dazzling white in the story.

Luke starts the story as a continuation of the calling of the first disciples that we talked about three weeks ago. Here, the same three men who left everything to follow Jesus are still following him only this time following him up the mountain to pray. Remember, in Luke, Jesus prays on the mountain in communion with God and does his healing and teaching ministry on a level place among the people. "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up to the mountain to pray." (Luke 9:28). Did you hear it here too? How easy that mountain climb was? They went up – easy peasy.

While Jesus was praying and the disciples weren't – it says they were awake but "weighed down with sleep" – the face of Jesus changes and Moses and Elijah are there talking to Jesus. The appearance of Moses and Elijah in verse 30 is Luke's way of validating the identity of Jesus. The two – Moses and Elijah – are usually interpreted as embodying the Law – Moses - and the Prophets – Elijah. Later, the risen Jesus himself will assert that Moses and the prophets point toward him. Luke tells us in our scene that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus and they "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:31) This is Luke's way of telling us to get ready for Jesus' teaching that he is the ultimate fulfillment of scripture that these two talked about so long ago.<sup>1</sup>

There are other places in the story where this happens too and I hope you heard it. After Peter wants to make these dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus to memorialize and freeze this mountaintop moment in time – what he realizes is a silly idea as soon as the words are out of his mouth - a voice comes from the cloud that had surrounded them, presumably the voice of God. "Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" (Luke 9:35)

If you think you've heard this from God before, you'd generally be correct. At the baptism of Jesus, God speaks a similar sentence but there are some notable differences. The message at Jesus' baptism was spoken directly to Jesus - "You are my son" - but here the message is for the disciples' ears - "This is my son". At the baptism the adjective describing Jesus was "beloved" — again, a message directed at Jesus — but here the word is

“chosen,” speaking directly to the disciples. They are also given a direct imperative - “Listen to him!” Lastly, whereas the voice at the baptism came “from heaven,” here it comes from the very cloud that surrounds the disciples. So, like baptism but God is talking to the disciples and us.

The scene ends with Elijah and Moses vanishing after God speaks. “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.” (Luke 9:36). And the very next verse which starts the next story says “on the next day, when they had come down from the mountain...” Again, my experience says that coming down from a mountain is sometimes as hard as going up. Sure, you have gravity working for you rather than against you but sometimes that gets you in trouble because you’re walking down a rocky path and your feet slip and gravity takes over. The trip up and down the mountain would have been an adventure. It doesn't get it's just due in any of the scriptures that talk about mountains.

If we think of the mountain as a metaphor for the human encounter with God – as we do and as scripture often does – then the climb itself up the mountain and the descent should also be a worthy metaphor for the human approach to God and how we are changed by an encounter with God. One of my favorite books is Bill Bryson's, *A Walk in the Woods*. It is a wonderfully funny story about the author's hike on the Appalachian Trail. Early in the book, Bryson described his first day of hiking, which began on the gently sloping access trails that lead to the trailhead on Springer Mountain in north Georgia and then on toward an ultimate destination some 2,100 miles away in Maine. Despite all his excitement and all his planning and all his preparation, Bryson said that first day on the trail was simply awful. He said, “I had never encountered anything so hard, for which I was so ill-prepared. Every step was a struggle.”<sup>2</sup>

Bryson goes on to talk about the difficulties of coming to terms with the constant dispiriting discovery that there is always one more hill. The thing about being on a hill, as opposed to standing back from it, he said, is that you can seldom see what's to come. Between the curtain of trees at every side, the ever-receding contour of the rising slope before you, and your plodding weariness, you gradually lose track of how far you have come. Each time you haul yourself up to what you think must surely be the crest, you find that there is in fact more hill beyond, sloped at an angle that kept it from view before, and that beyond that slope there is another, and beyond that another and another, and beyond each of those more still, until it seems impossible that any hill could run on this long. Still, you stagger on. What else can you do?

If you didn't know that Bryson was describing a hike on the Appalachian Trail, you might think that he was describing our life journey or maybe our faith journey. Sometimes, our lives may seem like level paths, smooth-going with scarcely a tree root or any loose rocks to trip us up. But other times, our lives seem more complex. In these other times, our lives and our faith are more often defined by the hills we must climb, by the sweeping upslopes, the sometimes steep and rocky mountain paths, the strenuous treks we must take, fraught with perils and pitfalls.

There are times on such hikes when not only reaching our destination, but even our survival is in question. The climb may seem relentless, wearying. We may find it easy to ignore God in the flatlands where everything is smooth and we are betrayed by our progress. When the path gets steep and treacherous, in anxiety and fear we are more likely to cry out to God. Ultimately, in those times when we do reach the summit, when we do come to the end of an arduous and frightful journey, or at least to a plateau or resting place, there...there is where we catch a glimpse of grace and even glory...there is where we experience profound gratitude...and, like Peter, we may want to stay and build dwelling places.

I get why Peter wanted to stay on the mountaintop. It's a good place to be. Having reached the summit--not just the top of the mountain, but a profound experience of holiness and mystery and glory - he didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay, to freeze the moment in time. But here's the thing, those moments on the mountain change us for the mundane moments when we come back down to the level place and the hard places.

Mountaineer Jon Krakauer writes that "When confronted with an increase in altitude, the human body adjusts in manifold ways, from increasing respiration to changing the pH of the blood, to radically boosting the number of oxygen-carrying red blood cells--a conversion that takes weeks to complete."<sup>3</sup> The physiological changes needed to sustain life in the higher reaches of the great mountains have their spiritual counterparts in the soul's ascent to God. Love's desire for intimate communion with God will demand adjustments to the frame of our thinking, the content of our feeling, the direction of our path - a transfiguration that stays with us when we come back to level ground.

We are changed after our God moments. And this I know. It is worth the climb, and that at the end of the path we may well see the glory of God, that we may well know God as never before. But such a trek surely does not reduce the dangers or difficulties of the ascent or descent. The fourth-century mystic Gregory of Nyssa said, "The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb."<sup>4</sup> It is a difficult climb. Last week, Jesus

said, "love your enemies, pray for those that abuse you." How long it will take, or what kind of effort until we can do that because it is a part of who we are. I don't know and can't say. I don't know because, like most of you, I am still climbing and I'm not a great climber. And some days the ascent is treacherous and demanding, and I find myself more than a bit shaky and frightfully short of breath.

But it is worth the relentless climb; of that, I am convinced. It is worth the climb. Indeed, a few months back, last week, and probably again tomorrow, I found myself or I will find myself shaking my head and giving thanks that God has the long view, because I certainly do not. Most of the time I am hard-pressed to understand, much less find words for the reasons behind much of life's struggle and suffering, especially this week. War shouldn't be and yet it is.

I expect this is exactly why Peter wanted to hang on to that remarkable moment of clarity when it all made sense. For it must have seemed then that God had a plan, and a good one at that --- and yes, one where victory would be won where it should, not with bullets and missiles but with hearts and minds on Jesus. With our encounter with God with Christ by our side, like Peter and James and John, we come off the mountain changed. Maybe that's the real point of the transfiguration. Maybe we are the ones who are changed. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of the scholarly commentary for this sermon is from *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians. Last Sunday after Epiphany* by Dennis Bratcher, 2015. Found at <http://www.criovoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Ctransfignt.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*, New York: Broadway Books, 1998, 35.

<sup>3</sup> The citation from Krakauer is from *Into Thin Air: a Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster*, New York, Doubleday, 1997, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II, 58, trans, Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978, 93.