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Matthew 17:1-9  
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## Mystery in the Clouds

Come to the mountain top. Where the air is crisp, and you can see for miles.  
Come with me, and I'll show you where you've come from and where you are going.

My family always talks about climbing Humbug Mountain with a few water bottles and a single turkey sandwich to share among the four of us. What my family learned that day is that climbing a mountain when you're not prepared is a difficult ordeal. But still, the view from the top was worth it, and that was one special sandwich.

Today we are looking at two stories about climbing a mountain. Each story is wrapped in a mysterious encounter with God. Showing how a mountaintop is a thin space. I'm not talking about the air getting thinner. I'm saying the ancients thought that mountains were where the human and divine worlds met. Think about the Parthenon on the heights over Athens or how Samaritans worshiped God in the high places.

But these stories are so much more than just mountaintop experiences. Mathew's transfiguration is a cloudy vision of where Jesus came from and where he is going. It is soaked in a mysterious language of shining faces and visiting prophets.

*And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.*

The word transfigured means metamorphosis. Like when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. This is the language of transformation and transition. In English, to be "trans" is to move from one state of being to another. Here Jesus is trans. Both a human person, but also a divine God. A pre-resurrected body that shines with potential energy. A shining face is also short-hand for being in harmony with God's plans, appearing in Old Testament books like Baruch, Ezra, and Daniel.

*Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.*

The appearance of Moses and Elijah tells us about Jesus. First, that Jesus is cool enough to join the big prophet's club, but also that Jesus is the rescuer of the Israelites. In the previous chapter, Peter declared that Jesus is the son of God, the anointed one who will come to rescue the Israelites. But I think that looking at the final chapter of the Old Testament, Malachi 4, tells us more.

*But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of armies.*

Jesus's face shines like the sun. He is following the expectation for the sun (s-u-n) of righteousness. Malachi goes on.

*Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

This is why Moses is showing up and why the mountaintop experience of Matthew looks like Exodus, with clouds, bright lights, and the voice of God. Malachi continues.

*See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*

The people expected that before the messiah, the anointed one of God, came, Elijah would prepare the way.

So the transfiguration lays out the case. The Israelites want a new Moses who will lead them out of slavery and to their own land.

I like to think that Jesus is pointing at the Exodus story of Moses climbing the mountain and saying. "This is the story of why I am here" Jesus is here because a group of people decided that freedom was more important than security. Going out into the wilderness and abandoning everything they knew was worth the risk because slavery (and, in Jesus's case, occupation) was intolerable.

While Moses is leading the people to the promised land, Jesus is going to the cross, and in the previous chapter, he tells the disciples, if any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. As we look forward to Ash Wednesday and Easter, the transfiguration is about looking death straight in the face without fear.

Maybe this scripture is taking down this dark passage because this week I've been thinking about what I will do with my life knowing I could get Parkinson's disease like my Dad. How do I make the next thirty years of my life worth living? Five, ten, fifty years.

Doesn't everything die at last and too soon? It is all precious little time to spend on our one wild and precious life.

The disciples cannot handle the reality of Jesus's death. They are thrown to the ground with fear. Perhaps they fear the movement will die with Jesus. I've talked to fellow pastors about the institutional church's end. Each with a calm serenity because Jesus does not need these walls, committees, or bylaws. Worshipers of God are already resurrecting the church, finding God in new and unique ways. People hurt by the old ways of doing church, with all its rules of who is in and who is out, are creating a church of outsiders. Churches focused more on loving our neighbors than getting our theology right. Churches that leave not just room for doubt but great halls of doubt and wonder.

Get up and do not be afraid. We call this tradition Anabaptist because some people thought the first baptism did not count. So they baptized each other into a new kind of church. Was it perfect? No. No. But the old ways of doing church died in their hearts. So they started fresh with a resurrected church and a resurrected Christ. Amen.