

INTRO:

This is what Peter might have said, on that Transfiguration Day:

“Walking ~~up the ladder~~ (away) was probably one of the most memorable moments for me because I looked down at my footprints, and I knew I was not coming back. Why were we here? What does it mean? I looked over my shoulder and there was earth, there was reality, there was home. I wanted to press the freeze button, I wanted to stop time. I really wanted to reach out and put it in my *space suit* and bring it home and show it to everybody. (I wanted to be able to say:) This is what it feels like... this is what it looks like.”¹

That’s actually what Eugene Cernan, *Apollo 17* astronaut, said talking about his experience of leaving the surface of the moon and returning to earth in 1972, the Last Man to walk on the Moon. I think he does a marvelous job of capturing that moment of Transcendence, of other-worldliness, that space travel and moonwalk must have been like.

I also hear echoes of what Peter says about his own experience having climbed the mountain, having cut ties in some sense with earthly reality, and having beheld the glory of God at the Transfiguration.

He wants to stay there, he wants to press the freeze button, to stop time. TO give them both credit, I think Peter, like Cernan, wants to carry it back with him for the good of everyone else.

We all know what it’s like to be experiencing a dream, and wanting it to keep going, but it recedes and you wake up. Our efforts to describe the dream, are usually pathetic and a little boring. Maybe that’s what Peter and the disciples were worried about, that it would slip through their hands and fingers like a cloud. Poof, gone in an instant.

¹ *Last Man on the Moon* 1 hour, 15 minutes or so

ASTRONAUTS:

Eugene Cernan returned from the Moon and lived a mostly healthy and productive life after the fact. Other high-profile astronauts struggled: Neil Armstrong became a bit of a recluse, Buzz Aldrin famously punched a man who challenged the moon-landing and did a depressing turn on *Dancing with the Stars*. Others (Edgar Mitchell and Gordon Cooper) fell into tasteless get-rich schemes or dabbled in theories of UFOs and the like.

As a group, they had a remarkably high divorce rates, similarly high rates of alcoholism and other troubles.

It's tough to come down from the mountain-top. To experience the awe and majesty of an incredible experience, and then to be plopped down into the regularity of life. How can Tuesday afternoon compare to travelling through the earth's atmosphere or orbiting the far side of the moon?

It was difficult for the astronauts to make sense of the "every day ness" of earth. It was difficult for Peter and James and John to fathom why the story should keep going, rather than end with the Transfiguration on that mountaintop.

It's difficult for us to have an experience of God, this Epiphany, and then to descend down to the harsh or just average reality of living in this world, where pain and hardship and poverty and privation are the norm.

TRANSITION:

A good comparison has been made between that journey and the one that we make after leaving the movie theatre after watching a really good movie. In a movie, we invest a few hours in entering a different world, and then we have to leave. We exit and then things return to normal. But, in order to do so we blink a few times, to reacclimate, and to adjust to the "real world." With a mixture of regret and acceptance we return to normalcy.²

² Willimon Willimon in R. Wayne Stacy's "Glimpses of Glory: Luke 9:28-36" *Review and Expositor*, 99, Winter 2002, 80-81; William Willimon "Come on Down" *Christian Century* (February 10, 2004) 19.

Another comparison of that journey from Transfiguration to the “real world” is worship itself, what we do hear on Sunday morning. Try this one out, see what you think. As we enter this place, or any other House of God, we have this sense that we have entered a whole new world for the span of an hour or so. Here, we have gotten a glimpse of God, we have spoken with those who have come before us, we have experienced—in some sense—an unveiling, a revelation, we have been changed by it. Then we exit, blinking our eyes to adjust our perceptions as we leave this place.

RESPONSE:

In both cases, I am always fascinated by the moviegoers among us who stay for the credits, past the movie’s ending, they remain just to be in that other world for a little bit longer. Likewise, I am fascinated by those who stay for the postlude or for private prayer, wanting to hold on to that experience of the transcendent.

JUST AS LEGITIMATE, after having that mountain-top moment, some of us leave promptly, we bound down from the mountain-top, ready to be God’s hands and feet in the world. Having beheld that epiphany, we break free from the gravitational orbit of the church’s confines, more perceptive to God’s reality inbreaking all around us. Having learned Peter’s lesson, we pray that God may

*send us out
to do the work you have given us to do,
to love and serve you
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.³*

GOD MOMENTS:

The world is terrified of us having those God moments, of course. But while the secular world prefers the humdrum claptrap of the commute, of consumption, and loneliness, we know that there is a world beyond that, a world of beauty and holiness and majesty. A world constantly being transfigured and transformed by God’s grace.

³ BCP, pg. 366.

Our job is, of course, to seek those experiences out and be receptive to them. Peter and John and James thought they were on a Retreat, a professional ED conference with a good view where maybe Jesus would give them an “attaboy” or two. Instead, they got an experience beyond their imagining or comprehension, they get Moses and Elijah and a cloud. They got a terrifying and beautiful dream that showed not a different Jesus but who he really was. It was terrifying because it predicted a nightmare in the future. It was beautiful because it was so radiant, so powerful, that the beauty of that dream, God’s presence in our lives, could be seen both on the mountaintop and in the valley.

APPLICATION:

I urge you to think about those “God Moments” those moments of revelation, unveiling and Transfiguration, in your own life.

In my time at Good Shepherd, I have heard it most particularly in the music that our choirs play, in the kindness that people show myself and my family, and in the role that the youth play as a part of the church community.

For the good of the community and for yourself, I urge you share them with one another and to acknowledge to God their existence.

At the same time, Peter’s mistake was that he” wanted to capture and routinize the presence of God’s glory.” But it’s not our job to “control (or manipulate) the holy.” It’s our job to respond simply in God’s instruction: “listen to him.””⁴

So we don’t need to leverage them, or monetize them, or to memorialize. They were here, and by tomorrow they will be gone, by Wednesday, we will bear the mark of our temporariness, our earthliness. Our season of Lent is indeed about to begin and Transfiguration might seem far off and of another world.

But those God moments happened, the Epiphany remains with us. We know them not only by the bright light that shines from them, but the light that shines in our hearts and faces from experiencing them. That reflection will guide us, that holiness, will guide us all the way to the moon and back, through the valleys and mountaintops to come.

AMEN.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke (Sacra Pagina)*, 155.