

Off the mountain: Sunday, February 25

*Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43*

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

What did they expect when they set off with Jesus that afternoon? An intimate conversation among the four of them? A chance to talk Jesus out of that strange, scary stuff he had been saying about suffering and dying, about saving or losing their lives?

Of course, whatever they expected, they got much more than they bargained for on that mountain: a dazzling experience of the holy, an encounter with the transcendent, Christ transfigured before their very eyes. Biblical scholar Eduard Schweitzer has said that “for a brief moment the curtain . . . is drawn aside,” and the disciples are “allowed to see in Jesus something of the glory of God and [God’s] kingdom, of that other life to which human eyes are otherwise blind.”

But the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration not only saw a vision; they also heard God’s voice coming out of the cloud, saying, “This is my child, my Chosen; listen to him.” I hear that voice, too, when members of the church hear and heed those things Christ has said: Love one another. Forgive, as God has forgiven you. Follow me.

At that first transfiguration, Peter had an idea: “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” I can identify with Peter. Mountaintop experiences are gifts, whole and complete in themselves: a marriage where the love and delight stay kindled through the years, children, friends old or new, a job that we enjoy doing and that contributes to the welfare of others, good retirement years. All of these things are sheer gifts from God, gifts meant to be savored and enjoyed, to be awed or humbled by.

But if we build a booth to them, erect a frame around them and enshrine them, we can end up worshiping those moments or memories or persons to the extent that they become a hindrance, a stumbling block or even idolatry—rather than unmerited

gift from God and resource for service to others.

We have choices about how to respond to the mountaintop transfiguration events in our lives. We can ruin them with “if onlys” (if only I could stay here longer; if only things would never change; if only I could relive that experience). We can reminisce about our experiences, caressing and massaging them as an excuse to disengage from the world. Or we can allow them to prepare us for what God calls us to do next.

God’s response to Peter is clear: “Jesus is more than a prophet like Moses. He is my own Son. And he is more than Elijah, the one portrayed as a rescuer of sufferers and a restorer of Israel. Jesus is my chosen instrument, my chosen servant, for all the nations. No booth building here! In him, I myself have chosen to pitch a tent with people, dwell with them and restore them to myself.”

In the transfiguration, God invites us to listen in again on Jesus’s conversation with Moses and Elijah. What they were talking about, Luke says, is Jesus’s departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. In other words, Moses and Elijah and Jesus were discussing Jesus’ impending death. The Greek word translated as “departure” is actually *exodus*. They were discussing Jesus’s crucifixion, his exodus or exit from this world.

There is more. With Jesus’s exodus he was rescuing us, God’s people, out of slavery by releasing us from all those things that have an unholy hold on us—work or money or death—and by placing his own blood on the doorposts of our lives. The disciples were speaking of a God who protects God’s people from enemies and anxieties by leading them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In Christ, this God “triumphs gloriously” over our enemies and over sin and death and whatever else separates us from God. These things are drowned in the waters of our baptism even as God brings us safely to the other side.

This talk about Jesus’s upcoming exodus suggests that disciples—then and now—should live as God’s people did on the night of the Passover. They were not weighed down with sleep or other concerns, but listened attentively to what God was doing in the world.

Listen to Jesus, God says. We will hear Jesus saying that he will be with us in the wilderness and in all the exits and exoduses of our lives. At the last, entry and not exit is our destiny. “Welcome home” will be the words we hear then. For now, we hear, “Come, my beloved, chosen ones—follow me out on the road again.”

What happened when the disciples went down to the plain? How did they communicate what they saw and heard to those who had not been up on that mountain? How did they share the experience with disciples who had stayed below? How do we communicate transfiguration or other mountaintop experiences that God gives us?

Luke tells us that the disciples “kept silent” about the transfiguration and “told no one any of the things they had seen.” Maybe that’s our clue. Don’t run off at the mouth about it or tell people that they “should have been there.” Maybe we best tell the story of the transfigured Christ when we serve the people who appear in our path, those who are desperate for release from the things that seize them and maul them and dash them to the ground.