

Sunday, March 16, 2014: Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration has a hundred sermons in it. But to me the most touching element is the subplot.

by [Maggi Dawn](#) in the [March 5, 2014](#) issue

Years ago a friend and I were introduced to a very famous and brilliant person—someone we both looked up to enormously. We found ourselves taken aback and at a loss for words. I spoke a few unfinished sentences and then my mind went blank. My friend, ever the extrovert, began talking in circles and couldn't stop. Eventually our hero graciously cut in and saved us by making it seem as if our stumbling words made complete sense.

The Transfiguration is one of those stories that have a hundred sermons in them; it is packed with hints about the identity of Jesus Christ, the relationship of the Trinity, the story of salvation, and the connection between the old and new covenants. But to me the most touching element is the subplot: a moment when three ordinary people are overwhelmed in the presence of greatness.

Whenever there's a mountain in the Bible, divine revelation is about to take place. Jesus taught by the seashore and on the hillside, but for the moment of Transfiguration he took his three closest disciples to a mountaintop where two towering figures of the ancient faith appeared: Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet had both had their own mountaintop moments.

We don't know which mountain this was—Tabor, Hermon, the Golan Heights—or how long it took the men to climb, or whether they had any clue about the spectacle they were about to see. But the sight of Jesus transformed before them was so hard to describe that all three synoptic Gospel writers grasped for metaphors. In addition to his face shining like the sun, Matthew said his clothes were dazzling white. Mark described them as whiter than the strongest bleaching agent could make them, while Luke compared them to a lightning flash. Peter wrote of seeing "majestic

glory” (2 Pet. 1:17).

This was no surprise to Moses and Elijah. But Peter, James, and John were completely at a loss—like my friend and I in the presence of our famous guest.

Each of them responded differently. Peter, the extrovert and man of action, started talking and suggesting what to do next—build three shelters or make some kind of liturgical response to the situation? It’s not completely clear what his idea was—some have suggested it was something to do with the Feast of Tabernacles. But maybe he just started talking because he didn’t know what to say and planning a course of action because that’s what he always did.

John said nothing, but we learn that all three of them fell face down in awe. John is traditionally assumed to be the John who saw the visions of the book of Revelation on Patmos—if so, perhaps he was adept at knowing the right response to the glory of Christ, since falling on his face was a bit of a habit. So maybe John was a brilliant mystic. Or maybe, like me, he was the kind of person who clams up in the presence of greatness.

And James? Well, he didn’t say anything either, but unlike John he doesn’t have a great literary reputation from which we can draw a retrospective picture. There is an epistle attributed to him, but everyone from the church fathers to Martin Luther quibbled about whether it was worth including in the Bible. It’s complete conjecture, of course, to ask what James was doing up on the mountain, but perhaps he might represent someone with “impostor syndrome”—the kind of person who sees everyone else doing the right thing and worries that he doesn’t fit in. “Wow,” I imagine him thinking, “Peter always knows what to say, and John knows what to do. Why am I here?”

How easy it is to spend time worrying about whether we are doing things right, saying things right or whether we should even be here at all. How easy it is to see a moment of God’s presence and immediately feel overwhelmed by our own inadequacies. But what I love is that these witnesses all get the same response from God—a voice that scared them: “This is my Son; listen to him!”

If you are the kind of person who acts and speaks before you think, stop talking. You don’t need to do anything in the presence of God; just listen. If you are the kind of person who needs time to process everything—someone who has things to say but whose brain freezes in the moment—don’t panic. You don’t need to say anything in

the presence of God; just listen. And if you are the kind of person who stands there feeling as if everyone else has a reason to be there and you got in by accident, relax. You don't have to justify your existence in the presence of God. Just listen.

Stop. Breathe. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"