

Sunday, February 15, 2015 | Transfiguration Sunday: Mark 9:2-9

Let's build shrines, Peter says. He doesn't know how to respond to a mystical mountaintop experience, and he's afraid.

by [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue

Mountaintop experiences happen throughout the Bible. These are stories of times when mere mortals encounter the living God in a life-altering and perspective-changing way. When Moses receives the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, his face becomes radiant from being in God's presence. Elijah's mountaintop experiences include the time he hears God's voice as the still, small voice—or, as the NRSV translates it, as “sheer silence.” God seems to hang out on mountains.

In this week's Gospel story, Moses and Elijah show up to share a mountain moment with Jesus. The scene comes right after Jesus gives several teachings about life and death. First he tells the disciples about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter tries to correct him, and Jesus calls Peter Satan. Then Jesus calls the crowd to join the disciples, and he teaches that his followers must “say no to themselves” and be willing to “lose their lives” on account of Jesus and because of the good news he brings. And finally, he says that some of the people standing there will not die before they see the kingdom of God “arrive in power” (Mark 8:31–9:1, CEB). Is Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain equivalent with this arrival?

To find out what the transformative and good news is that Jesus brings, we have to go back to chapter one: “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, ‘Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!’” (Mark 1:14–15, CEB). In chapter 8, Jesus explains that this good news could cause you to lose your life—but if you lose it for this reason, you will save it.

Could it be that a life both lost and not lost is a life radically transformed? The old life is gone, but the new life has arrived. This is the Common English Bible

translation of “repent and believe.” It’s less about having regret for past actions and agreeing with certain ideas about God, more about turning your life around and changing your heart. There’s some kind of life that needs to be relinquished if there’s to be a transformed life.

The transfiguration of Jesus happens six days after these teachings, with Peter, James, and John as witnesses. They are terrified and confused when they see Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together. Peter, who recently questioned Jesus about the necessity of dying and rising, resists the fluid and transformational nature of the mountaintop experience by trying to nail it down. Let’s build shrines, he says. He doesn’t know how to respond to a mystical mountaintop experience, and he’s afraid, right along with James and John. Not understanding what’s happening, Peter tries to create containers for the experience, placing the holy men each in their own tabernacle: organized, separated, preserved.

But after this moment of illumination and glistening clothing, terror strikes the disciples, and they pass into the shadows. A cloud overshadows them. And in this cloud of unknowing, they are finally able to hear God—this moment in the shadows changes everything. Suddenly, looking around, they see things differently. Mountaintop experiences, it would appear, are not all sunshine and light. Sometimes it’s our entering into the shadows that transfigures us.

As the disciples come down the mountain, they are still wondering, “What is this ‘rising from the dead’?” It hearkens back to the teaching that all who lose their lives—by changing them, by turning them around, by “repenting”—will save their lives. At the point of turning, something of the true self is discovered.

“Remember,” says Lily Tomlin, “we’re all in this alone.” It’s a funny line but also a complicated one: it’s both true and not true, a paradox. So is the statement that you will save your life by losing it. How we understand these paradoxes depends on how we understand our terms. What is life? How are we alone?

Each of us lives in a kind of holy solitude, a place in which our soul is alone with God. And yet the fact that we each have this private, intimate, one-to-one relationship with God is a sign of our shared humanity. We’re not alone in having this experience; we all have it. We’re all in this boat together, and alone.

Mountaintop experiences can be exhilarating. But there is something to be said for the consistency of a balanced daily life filled with remembrance of the holy. How can

we foster this kind of deepening? As we mature, we can get in touch with this deep soul place, the true self, letting go of the parts of our lives that are just illusion. Parker Palmer calls this aligning soul with role. Thomas Keating calls it finding true self. We can strive for these things by making time for contemplative prayer and by creating safe communal spaces for what Palmer calls “the shy soul” to emerge and become more truly known. It is deep soul work that brings us through the places of shadow and the places of illumination, to settle in for the long journey of spiritual maturation.