

A MOMENT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Could this be your key moment?

A sermon preached by
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This month, during Black History month, we have heard and read the stories of many of the outstanding African-American leaders who made a difference, each in his or her own way. One of the names you hear often during this month is George Washington Carver. Carver was a botanist, an inventor, an environmentalist, and an advocate for justice in the late 19th and early 20th century. He was born in southwest Missouri as a slave during the Civil War. He struggled to get an education to better himself, finally getting admitted to Simpson College, a Methodist liberal arts institution in Iowa. He was the first black graduate student and faculty member at Iowa State University, then moved to the famous Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he taught for 40 years.

George Washington Carver was one of the most famous plant scientists in the country during his time. His research centered on strategies to replenish the soil after years of cotton farming had depleted the nutrients. Mostly he concentrated on peanuts and sweet potatoes, which were excellent rotation crops. In fact, in one publication, Carver gave 105 different recipes or uses for peanuts.¹

Professor Carver won many awards and recognitions, and near the end of his career he was honored by the National Academy of Science in Washington, D.C. At that gathering, he was asked a personal question: “Dr. Carver, how is it that you got so caught up in the lowly peanut? Before you came along, it was just a common crop.”

Carver’s answer was very humble, yet also very profound. He said, “Well, sir, I asked God for something big that was really worth all I had to offer. But God looked at me and said, ‘George, you’re not as big as you think you are. You’re just a little man. So I’m going to give you something you can handle, something more your size. And when I looked up, the Lord handed it to me. It was a peanut! I didn’t know what could be done with a peanut, but God thought it had some potential. So I looked at it, and I said, ‘Little peanut, let’s see what can be done with you.’ And that’s how it all began.”

In the life of George Washington Carver, that was one of those key moments. God gave him an opportunity, a glimpse of glory, if you will. He seized the moment, and it made all the difference in his life.

One of the key moments in the life of Jesus and three of his disciples was the experience we call the Transfiguration on the mountain. The story is told almost exactly the same in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Just six days earlier, in the region of Caesarea Philippi—north of Galilee—Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was. For the first time, Peter had confessed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God. Jesus then proceeded to tell them of his journey to Jerusalem, his rejection, arrest, suffering and crucifixion. This put the disciples into a tailspin of anxiety, doubt and worry about their future. They thought this Messiah-thing would certainly end up somewhere better than a cross.

After six days—just like God kept Moses waiting six days on Mount Sinai, did you notice?—Jesus took his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, up the mountain alone. Two possible locations are suggested for the Mount of Transfiguration. One is Mount Tabor in lower Galilee. It was a significant site in Old Testament times, and there is a church and a tradition dating back to the third century for that location. Others suggest that since Jesus was near Caesarea Philippi, the closest tall mountain there would be Mount Hermon, the tallest peak in the region.

It doesn't really matter. On some tall mountain in the area, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and on the top of the mountain, he was transfigured. The Greek word there is *metamorphote*, from which we get metamorphosis. His clothes and skin became bright as the sun, like he was being illuminated by a powerful spotlight.

Suddenly two men appeared with Jesus. Somehow the disciples knew that one was Moses and one was Elijah. These two significant holy men from Jewish history represented the Law and the Prophets, the summary of God's story with God's people.

That was all Peter could take; he was about to burst with excitement. So he said, "*Lord, it is good for us to be here.*" (Now there is the understatement of the century!) "*If you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*"² Peter's words were still hanging in the air when a cloud overshadowed the mountain. But this was no cold front moving in. This was a bright cloud, the cloud of glory,

the *shekinah* glory of the Lord that had come over the mountain of God, Mount Sinai, when both Moses and Elijah had made their pilgrimages there.

Out of the cloud there came a Voice, and it said, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*”³ These were almost the same words the voice of God spoke at the baptism of Jesus. These were words of identity, except for the added imperative: listen to him! Can you imagine what that voice must have sounded like? I know, I can’t either. But the sound of that voice put the faces of the disciples in the dirt.

Shaking in their sandals, the next voice they heard was a familiar one. Jesus touched them and said, “*Get up, and do not be afraid.*”⁴ The scene was back to normal: Jesus not shining, Moses and Elijah gone, no cloud, no voice. What had just happened?

As they walked back down the mountain, Jesus ordered them—the text says “ordered”—“*Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.*”⁵ I’m sure the three men thought, “What? Don’t tell anyone? We have an experience like that and you expect us to keep quiet about it?” Not that they understand at that point what Jesus even meant by being raised from the dead. But that’s what they had seen: Jesus in his spiritual glory, a glimpse of heaven. For a moment the veil had been pulled back, and Peter, James, and John saw and heard what it was like to be in the presence of God. It was an unforgettable moment on the mountaintop.

Almost a hundred years later, someone writing in the name of Peter recalled, I think, the witness of Peter that he told about that night until the day he died: “*We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*”⁶ Even beyond Peter’s time on earth, this was a key moment for the great apostle.

But what does the Transfiguration mean for us today, besides being a very cool story? Is this a key moment that can teach us or show us something relevant or important?

I think this experience of Jesus and the three key disciples shows us who God really is. Or we might could say, this experience shows us who really is God. The Transfiguration is about identity. It confirms what Peter said on the road near Caesarea Philippi: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus is the one the Law and the Prophets (Moses and Elijah) point to. God speaks the identifying words God spoke at the baptism. The glory is amazing and indisputable. There is no doubt about it; this is a God-moment!

Such an experience doesn't really call us to do anything. We don't need to scurry around and build shelters for the big guys. Let's just try to take it all in. Let's just bow our hearts and heads in awe and wonder and praise and worship. We are getting a glimpse of God's glory here. It is awesome beyond description.

James Howell, pastor of Myers Park UMC in Charlotte, NC, often pours fodder into my homiletical hopper. He commented on this story: "This text, like so many, is about God. There is no moral, no takeaway. The sermon should invite people to marvel, to wait, to stammer in puzzlement and delight. What did the disciples who were there do? They didn't theologize, they didn't plot a mission trip. No, 'They fell on their faces in awe.' I dream of the sermon that will cause people simply to be in awe."⁷ So do I, James. So do I.

A second function of this key passage is to keep the dream alive in the valleys to come. After you have been on the mountaintop, you inevitably have to come back down to the valley. Jesus and the three disciples came off the mountain and immediately ran into a difficult situation with a boy who had epilepsy. Within ten verses of the Transfiguration, Jesus is saying, "*You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?*"⁸ Life gets back to normal very quickly, doesn't it? There are stresses and strains and heartaches and troubles, but if you have been to the mountaintop, it gives you strength to carry on.

Nelson Mandela had 27 years in the valley before he ever got to the mountaintop. For 27 years he was a political prisoner of the *apartheid* regime in South Africa. For 27 years, he was told he was a criminal, a person of an inferior race, unfit for human society. But Nelson Mandela did not believe his captors. He steadfastly clung to his belief in himself and in the justice of his cause, no matter what obstacles he faced or mistreatment he suffered. He said, “There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.”⁹

When Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, he led his country to a new day of liberation. His greatest mountaintop experience came in 1994 when he became the first democratically-elected President of South Africa. The day *apartheid* fell apart was a victory for freedom-loving people everywhere. As Mandela said, “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”¹⁰ A day on the mountaintop can give you strength and courage for years in the valley.

Finally, I think the Transfiguration event is an experience of assurance. In this story, the disciples (and we) see a glimpse of the glory of God and God’s Son. This is how it will be in heaven. Jesus told them to keep quiet about it until after the resurrection because until Jesus was raised from the dead, the heavenly glory on the mountaintop made no sense. Once Jesus is raised, we know where he was headed all along. And we know that one day we will go with him to our own place in heavenly glory.

What sort of response can we make to this incredible vision? We don’t need to rush around and act busy; that was Peter’s mistake, and he was soon hushed. On the other hand, we don’t want to be silent about the glory we have seen. We don’t have to be, because Jesus has been raised from the dead. One response we surely need to make is to ask Jesus into our heart. We need to accept by faith what Jesus did for us, to trust him with our life and our eternity. That’s the first step to glory.

George Washington Carver had a key moment in his life long before he discovered the usefulness of the peanut. He discovered a relationship with Jesus. Though the Civil War was over, Carver and his brother were still

living as slaves on a small farm in southwest Missouri. In a letter he wrote in 1931, he told the story:

A dear little white boy, one of our neighbors, about my age came by one Saturday morning, and in talking and playing he told me he was going to Sunday school tomorrow morning. I was eager to know what a Sunday school was. He said they sang hymns and prayed. I asked him what prayer was and what they said. I do not remember what he said; only remember that as soon as he left I climbed up into the loft, knelt down by the barrel of corn and prayed as best I could. I do not remember what I said. I only recall that I felt so good that I prayed several times before I quit. My brother and myself were the only colored children in that neighborhood and of course, we could not go to church or Sunday school, or school of any kind.

That was my simple conversion, and I have tried to keep the faith.¹¹

As we trust Jesus and as we keep the faith, we learn to watch for signs of glory. We long for glimpses of the mountaintop to reassure us, to strengthen us in the valley, to give us courage to be disciples of Jesus in a sin-sick world. We learn to listen for the voice of God. We learn to listen to our life.

Rev. Frederick Buechner has a glorious way with words, and I want to leave you with some of his this morning: "There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more hauntingly and compellingly. ...If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in the excitement and the gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."¹²

This is transfiguration. This is how to glimpse glory. Some days we challenge you with an action plan for your life or an agenda for some sort of change, and that's fine. But today, I just want to invite you to see Jesus on the mountain, to listen for the voice of God, and to be in awe of it all. Maybe this could be a moment that would be unforgettable for the rest of

your life. It could, because all moments are key moments, and all of life is grace. Listen to him. Listen to your life. Listen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver.

² Matthew 17:4.

³ Matthew 17:5.

⁴ Matthew 17:7.

⁵ Matthew 17:9.

⁶ 2 Peter 1:16b-19.

⁷ James Howell, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10127/weekly-preaching-transfiguration-sunday-2020>.

⁸ Matthew 17:17.

⁹ Nelson Mandela quotes, *Thinkexist.com*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ George W. Carver, "Letter to Isabelle Coleman, July 24, 1931," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver.

¹² Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1991), <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/1/1/life-itself-is-grace>.