



February 27, 2022
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Luke 9:28-36
Get Down Off That Mountain



Prayer beads massaged in quiet reflection. Pilgrimages to mountainous Taize, France. Buddhists sitting quietly for months under Bodhi trees, contemplating the infinite. Hare Krishnas beating their drums, chanting their god's name for hours upon end. These various religious practices from divergent religious understandings all share the common attempt to shrink the distance between heaven and earth. God has crafted the human creature with five senses. The ability to apprehend solid walls, gravity, and color, but there seems to be a sixth sense that we are shaped with that is able to see a deeper reality beyond the capabilities of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. These disparate practices all strive to loosen our perception of a flat reality, to release us into a Godly sight.

Apparently, God has grafted into the human soul an urge for transcendence. Bartleby's dictionary defines transcendence as, "Lying beyond the ordinary range of perception...In Kant's theory of knowledge, being beyond the limits of experience and hence unknowable...Being above and independent of the material universe."

This definition suggests that transcendent moments come not so much through human effort, trying to reach out to God, as they do as sheer, divine gifts.

After a reluctant, grueling climb at which Peter was exhausted to the point of sleep, to collapse, suddenly the prison walls of the five senses dissolved away and Peter glimpses his sandaled, bearded friend glowing with glorious light. Mark tells us that it was so bright that not even a washer person could get clothes that white. So, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter saw the human Jesus revealed as the divine Christ.

Some years ago I went on a mission trip with over two dozen people from various religious experiences and understandings. We embarked on a grueling journey. This time, instead of scaling a mountain, we found ourselves battling airport checkout lines, hauling dozens of bags of medical equipment, and weaving in and out of traffic in the Dominican Republic, where a stop light is only a suggestion, lanes are simply an illusion, and a moped – by some freak quantum fluctuation of the universe – that is designed to hold one person, can actually carry six!

But at the end of our journey, instead of a glowing Christ, we found a building with chipped paint walls and frigid showers.

But this was just the first stage of our journey and, before it was over, we too would see behind the walls of dust, worn-out equipment, and iron bars – see past those and God would open our eyes to something beyond

the capabilities of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.

Peter's vision brought revelatory insight, which could only come from the mind of God.

Princeton Professor Beverly Gaventa describes these transcendent glimpses. She says they "...communicate in visual and auditory terms a fleeting perception of the eternal splendor, an elusive awareness of the divine presence." Transcendent visions help us to see things as they truly are.

While in the Dominican Republic, I saw a young boy named Willie at the clinic. He was a healthy, smiling, plump young boy with white teeth and a beautiful smile, who loved nothing more than a new pair of sneakers.

He was like thousands and millions of other children all across the planet, or at least that's what I thought. That's what I thought until the famous Cora of Canada, who is a legend in the Dominican Republic, told me about him. On a year's previous trip, several members went with Cora into the countryside, into the poorest rural areas of the DR. They discovered this boy Willie, who was literally wasting away. Cora showed me a picture of what he looked like last year, and you could not just see his ribs, but the rounded edges of them. So they rushed him back to the clinic and it turned out he had diabetes; his body simply wouldn't process the food that he was eating. Yet here he was, standing in front of me, healthy and smiling!

In that picture of Willie when he was a broken and sick young boy, the picture of those

protruding ribs, reminded me of the images you see sometimes of Christ on the cross. And I knew that at that time, Christ was suffering right there with him. But just as God transfigured Jesus so many years ago, God transfigured Willie into his truest self – that self that God intends for every single child on this planet.

Then I had the privilege of driving out to the countryside to visit him in his home. His brother, his mother, his father were all there standing in his home, which is literally smaller than my office here at the church. They invited us in to sit down and served us a delicious cup of Dominican coffee. It's my favorite kind, in which the spoon stands up all on its own when it sits in the cup.

In that simple act of sharing coffee, I knew we were the same. His brother was poking and prodding him, his father was chatting with us, and we were talking about umm...well, I don't really know because I don't understand Spanish, but it just felt like it was probably the most basic conversation that could happen anywhere, millions of places all across the world; perhaps chatting about the weather or the neighbor's cat. And as I saw this family, a hardworking family where the father toils for hours every day in the blazing hot sun, his mother washes clothes on the riverbed, cooks their supper on these three stones, God pulled back the foggy curtain of culture, race, economics, and education, which sometimes makes us feel like we are different, and for a moment made us one with each other and with God.

But of course the trip was not all hope and light. I remember after visiting that home we went to another. And at that home, which somehow was dimmer and darker than Willie's house, there was a woman who appeared to be in her 60's, but Cora assured us that she was somewhere in her 40's, and she was mentally challenged. She had a young three-year-old daughter and the woman was pregnant again. Cora thought it was probably some neighbor that had taken advantage of her. And her daughter's eyes didn't seem to have the light that so many children's eyes have in them; she simply stared in the distance the whole time we were there, with sullen eyes. As I walked away from that place, I couldn't see any signs of hope.

But I remembered Peter's vision; I imagine this special glimpse of Christ strengthened Peter's resolve for years to come. But he didn't stay up on that mountain, these transcendent gifts that God gives us, these insights, are not a rescue from the trials of life. Jesus had more important things for Peter to accomplish. He would need to come down from the mountain and return to the struggle of life, but he would do so with a new memory.

Presbyterian pastor Keith Geiselman wrote these words:

...What is perceived on the mountain must be taken back into the day to day stuff of our lives. It must be borne through the moments of emptiness and ambiguity which form our own good Fridays -- the vigil at a hospital bedside, the agony of holidays following the loss of a loved one, the loss of job and the

identity and purpose it gave to us, the failure of a relationship and all the hopes which had been placed upon it.

And perhaps for me on that trip, the most dazzling display of God's transforming power came in the most unlikely of places. It was the place in which people of faith came down off the mountain highs and waded in the muck, to bring transcendent visions of joy to more and more people.

It was a garbage dump – a garbage dump! You can't make this stuff up. In San Juan, in the Dominican Republic, a place of refuse, of buzzing flies, of dengue fever, of rats, the place where the leftovers of life are given up on, thrown away, and burned, somebody had a different vision of that place. A vision which I believe could only come from the insight of divine courage. And God planted this vision that instead of thousands of rats roaming through that garbage dump, it would be hundreds and hundreds of boys and girls. Instead of mounds of paper trash, there would be scores of books. Instead of a place where things come to be burned and die, forgotten young minds would be lit up with education and with truth; these young minds would be awakened to their potential. Instead of a place of no hope and of no future, with wailing tears and listless faces, chorus of songs of praise to God would go up from this place every day. God transfigured this place of decay into one that's bursting with life. Apparently, the power company wouldn't even bring out electricity to that place at first because they knew it would fail. But you and I know that we can do all things through God who strengthens us.

So we went to that school one morning. We saw hundreds and hundreds of children there with their bright backpacks. Each class took turns singing and then they said a prayer that went on for a minute or two. I couldn't understand a word, except for one; one word that was repeated over and over again, "...gracias...gracias...gracias". Then they raised the Dominican flag and then the American flag along with it. The American flag is a sign of thanksgiving to the people of this church and other churches all around this country that have given them hope. And even as God transfigured that place, my heart was opened up – that *that* country, that *this* world, is not a place destined to decay and violence; things *can* get better when we believe in God's power to transform and get on board!

Faith is not a spectator sport. When God gave Peter that vision, He told him to get down off that mountain, to get to work building God's Kingdom! And every week, again, through your prayer and through that money you put in the offering plate, you are a player in God's Kingdom!

So I invite you in those dark moments, to look for that shimmering splendor, to get down off that mountain, and for God's sake – that is for the sake of God's Kingdom – do something to transfigure another. And like Peter and those 1,500 school children, that they and we together might see the very face of God. Amen.