

Walking the Spiritual Labyrinth

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EXODUS 24:12-18

¹²The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their



instruction.” ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

GOSPEL MATTHEW 17:1-9

¹Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.



³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard

this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

Transfiguration of Jesus; Have you ever had a life changing experience?

I remember when my first child was born. One day I was just a guy, and the next day I was a parent! I held my newborn daughter in my arms and I felt a hundred wonderful things all at once, and I knew I was a different person. At the time I felt very different, I felt things I had never felt before. I knew I was different. I could exactly tell you how, but I knew I was somehow a very different person.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, we see Jesus and his disciples having a transforming experience—in this case quite literally.

In the story this morning, Jesus takes three of his disciples up a mountain, and an amazing thing happens. Jesus is transfigured. Now it is hard to say exactly what that means. The Greek word used is μεταμορφώθη (metemorphothē), from which we get the word metamorphism, and it basically means that Jesus changed. Well, actually the word Morphe means “to change.” Metemorphothē means the change goes beyond expectations—like a caterpillar to a butterfly. Morphe is when you clean up well—you change your clothes, you shave, you wash up. Metamorphe is when your essential nature is changed.

Matthew gives us a description—he says his face began to shine and his clothes were a dazzling white. When Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, his face was also shining.

Jesus was changed—he was transfigured. For him, at that time, it was an instantaneous change. One minute he was Just Jesus, that guy they had been following around for the past few months, and the next moment he was Jesus, in all his Glory. It was as if Peter and James and John saw Jesus as he really was, the veil was lifted, and they saw him as the true Son of God that he really was.

There is a symphony conductor in Fairbanks, who is a large, rather ungainly person. I have seen him socially a few times, and he comes across as someone whose body is too big for him. He is a bit awkward and somewhat clumsy. But when you put the baton his hand, and put him before an orchestra, he is as graceful as a ballerina. When he is conducting, he is transfigured—and you get the feeling that you are watching his true self in action when you see him at the podium.

When Jesus was transfigured, Peter, James and John saw his true self. They saw Jesus in all his glory; they saw him as a true Son of God.

We have transfiguring moments sometimes. We have moments in our lives where we are changed. Ours are usually nowhere near as dramatic. But we have transformative moments. Not all of them are directly spiritual in nature

I spoke about the birth of my first child. I was changed. Caitlin's birth had transfigured me in ways I could not imagine. I was a father now.

That changed me. But it took a while to realize how deep those changes went.

Seven months after her birth, I was out rock climbing with a friend. Now before Caitlin was born, I used to go climbing at least once a month as soon as it was warm enough. Caitlin was born in September, and it was late April before I got back to climbing.

I was halfway up the first pitch, when I started thinking about my daughter. And I started thinking that if I fell and hurt myself, who would be there for her. I had all sorts of thoughts I had never had on a rock before, and it was really bothering me, and I realized at some point that I did not want to be on that rock. (Which is not the best thought when you are already about a 100 feet off the ground!)

All that was tied with learning to be a father. And I did have to learn to be a father. When we were coming home from the hospital, I remember putting her in her car seat, and looking the nurse, wondering when she was going to say, "Wait a second. We can't let you take that baby home. You have no idea how to be parents." She would have been right! But she didn't do that. She let me drive off with that baby!

When we encounter God, we are changed people.

Claude and Susie Swaim lived next to the last church I served. Susie was a charter member, and lifelong faithful member of the church. Claude was not a believer. He made that clear to me when we first met. But Claude attended as much as any other person, because he loved his wife, and his wife loved the church, so Claude took good care of the church. He would wake up when it was forty below, and make sure the furnace was working in the church, and if it was not he would fix it. He rebound the damaged hymnals. He cleaned the gutters. He had been a trustee, but they found out that he did not believe in God, so they basically fired him. But he still helped out around the church.

When I met Claude he was ninety, so he had slowed down some. One weekend we were at a church retreat, and Claude was there with us. Now I have to tell you that Susie was one of the sweetest persons you could ever meet, and it broke her heart that Claude was not a Christian. And during this retreat, God had been working on him.

Well one night of the retreat, everyone from our church met together, and had an impromptu prayer meeting, I prayed for everyone in the group, including Claude. After he was finished he started talking. He said that was the first time he had been included in a prayer, or really anything in the church since the trustees fired him. He said he had been going to this church since it was established, and that he was finally ready to make a commitment to Christ, become a Christian, and join the church. Well we baptized him that very night. He was 95 then, and we didn't want to take any chances!

Later his daughter, who was a very strong Baptist, and had very clear ideas about what a real Christian was, told me she didn't think her dad was a real Christian. She thought he just became a Christian that night to get his wife off his back. Now the daughter did not live in Alaska, and did not see her father very often, so I guess I could understand why she might think that.

But I knew different. And I told her. Claude was raised in Tennessee and had a racist streak in him. It wasn't strong, but it was there. It mostly came out at mealtime. Claude and Susie had moved to the Pioneer Home in Fairbanks, and they took their meals there. Several of the staff were African American, and when they were serving the table where Claude sat, he just quietly got up and went to a table where a white person was serving.

After his baptism, he was back at the home, sitting down for dinner, when the server came over, an African American woman, and said, "I suppose you are going to change tables, since I am serving this table." And Claude looked at Susie and said, "Well, not that I've gone and gotten baptized I guess I ought to change my ways," and he stayed at the table, and never changed tables again because of the race of the person who was serving him.

Claude was transformed. He had encountered God, and was transformed. Maybe not the way his daughter wanted him to be transformed, but he was transformed.

As we are all being transformed—transfigured, each in our own way.

In the Book of Romans, Paul writes, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" This transformation is a regular part of the Christian life.

It is what we do on a daily basis.

Oh our faces do not shine, like Jesus, or Moses in the Old Testament lesson we read this morning. But we are constantly growing, and growing toward becoming something glorious. And it is about more than just glowing faces.

Paul writes about Moses going up on the mountain, and how his face was glowing so brightly he had to wear a veil when he was with people. “Hey, you mind turning your face down a little bit. It is blinding me!”

And Paul says,

... when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

But here is the trick. We don't change up on a mountain top. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain. It was great up there! “Let's build some tents, and never come down!”

But they could not stay there. They had to come off the mountain. When we have mountaintop experiences, we cannot stay there. We have to move on, to whatever is next.

I remember the first time I joined a church as an adult.

This church had a new member's class, and during the class we were asked to share our spiritual journey. One fellow shared about a group he was in during high school; they met every day during lunch for prayer, they did weekly Bible studies, they volunteered at a homeless shelter—it was obviously a very significant time in his life.

And his story ended there—which seemed really unfortunate, because he was in his mid-thirties, and high school was a good fifteen years behind him. It was as if he had this mountaintop faith experience, but his whole faith journey stopped there.

He was never able to get his faith off the mountain, and into his everyday life.

For us, the Christian life is not just about the glowing moment. The changes that we undergo are slower, and harder, and done right here where we live. Mountain tops are great for the view. But the fertile ground is in the valley.



When I first came to Medford, Bob Haddon took me up on Roxy Anne, and I was able to look down on the valley. It was a beautiful day, and it was a beautiful view. Part of me did not want to leave. But I had to come down. I could not be your pastor from that mountaintop. I had to come down and live and work among you.

Remember the conductor I mentioned earlier? Yes he was graceful when he took up the baton, but do you know how many rehearsals and practices it took for him to get to that graceful state? He had to work on it.

And so do we.

That's why we come here every week.

This is our rehearsal time for glory. We share this meal, the Lord's Supper, on Sunday, as practice so we can share our lives with others Monday through Saturday. We hear the word of God preached on Sunday, which is practice for hearing it Monday through Saturday. We give an offering on Sundays so we can offer our lives Monday through Saturday. We pray for others on Sunday, so we can pray for them and help them Monday through Saturday.

We are entering the season of Lent. In this season we are going to see that Spiritual Walk is more a Labyrinth than a hike in the woods. Our journey over the next few weeks will have many twists and turns, because it is a real journey, one we make in real life, not just a Disney ride. We won't always know where we are going. We start our journey on Ash Wednesday, with a time of penance and reflection. We will encounter temptation, as we look at the temptations of Jesus. We will journey with a rabbi who had a stranger encounter with Jesus, one that left him very confused, but more open to the spirit of God. We see an outcast woman, who wants to talk about anything but the most important thing in her life. We will see a very inconvenient miracle, one that most people want to claim did not happen, but one that changed a man's life. We will see a man raised from the dead, and how that affects our lives.

We will walk a spiritual Labyrinth the next few weeks, and you get to practice on your own.

For the Christian life is a journey. We come off the mountain, and travel the valleys. It is about growth and progress, even if our growth and progress are slow. It is about change. It is about our encounters with God, some of them of the mountaintop variety. It is about life, the life we are called by God to live.