

Have you been to the mountaintop?

Just a few miles from where I grew up along the Missouri River in South Dakota is a place called Spirit Mound.¹ Spirit Mound was an annual field trip destination for 5th graders studying South Dakota history. It was visited by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804 after hearing about it from the indigenous people of the area. The two explorers did the 9-mile round-trip trek from the river to this humble overlook on a hot and humid August day. They wrote enthusiastically in their journals about Spirit Mound and all they experienced and saw from the top, saying “we beheld a most beautiful landscape.”² What is impressive about this mount, is not its height – it sits a mere 70 feet above the plains.

What is impressive about the “beautiful landscape” of the top is the vastness of flat prairie lands surrounding it. You can see for miles and miles in every



direction from this tiny “peak” rising from the plains. Lewis and Clark saw bison for the very first time in herds by the hundreds grazing across the landscape. And they saw tallgrass prairie in its unspoiled glory. Even though it really is a minimal

¹ The indigenous Sioux, Omaha, and Otoe believed the hill in the vast prairie-lands was home to “little devils.” <https://www.spiritmound.org/story-of-spirit-mound/>.

² William Clark, <https://www.spiritmound.org/story-of-spirit-mound/>.

rise upon the landscape, ascending Spirit Mound is still a “mountaintop experience” because the change in perspective is **so significant**.

Maybe you’ve had a mountaintop experience – either literally or figuratively in your life. Whether you climbed up 70 feet in elevation, summited a 14,000-foot mountain in the Rockies, or had some life-changing experience ... in a relationship, or career, or faith. A mountaintop experience is often a turning point, a milestone, or an unforgettable moment that **forever** changes you.

Today’s readings feature not one, but two of these stories – the reading of Exodus describing Moses after his mountaintop experience on Mount Sinai and Jesus’ transfiguration with Elijah & Moses. Both narratives follow a similar storyline. Man goes up to the top of the mountain. He encounters God. He is physically changed – radiant, shining, glowing. Witnesses who see this change are terrified – either simply by the sight of it, or because of proximity to the Divine, or maybe just because it doesn’t really fit into the realm of possibility and logic and what can be explained.

[SLIDE]

New Testament Scholar Dr. Troy Troftgruben explains, “The Transfiguration is one of the most quintessential mountaintop experiences in scripture: a glimpse of

divine glory, a word from God, and an experience that changes all who are present.”³

For Moses – this radiating holiness happens after he’s spoken with God and received the “tablets of the covenant” which he carries down Mount Sinai to the people. If we look at the “quintessential” story of Jesus – we know something significant is coming because they go up a mountain. But what is happening just before and as this story unfolds?

The last thing we are told about in Luke happened 8 days prior. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus tells him “Don’t tell anybody!” and then instructs that anyone who wants to follow him should take up their cross and lose their life.

And then we’re here. Jesus takes his inner circle– Peter, James, and John with him up a mountain. Not to check out a great view – or to accomplish a bucket-list hike – but to **pray**. This whole scene of transfiguration is born out of a deep desire for prayer, for connection with the Father. These verses are “**embedded** in prayer.”⁴

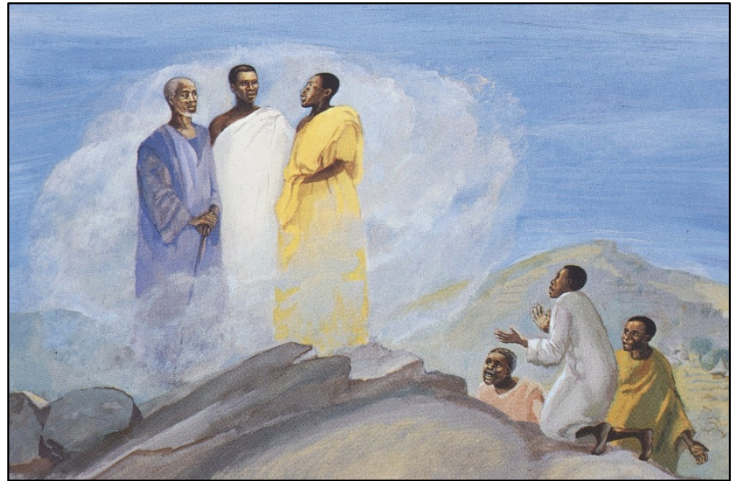
It is in the midst of prayer that Jesus’ transfiguration happens – he begins to glow, his face changes, his clothing is as bright as lightning.

³ Troy Troftgruben, Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a], Transfiguration of Our Lord. From WorkingPreacher.org.

⁴ Sarah Henrich, Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a], from WorkingPreacher.org.

You see,

“**Prayer**, communion with God, is very often associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life, beginning with baptism. It is the presence of God’s Holy Spirit that empowers Jesus for healing, for the calling of the Twelve, for enduring the temptations, and for speaking truth.”⁵



In this moment, the Holy-Spirit-outpouring is just so dramatic that there is a spectacular **visible** and **audible** presence of God. The disciples there see this unfold before their eyes. The bright light and the change that was on Jesus’ face. They sense the presence of God surrounding them like a cloud. They hear the voice speaking from out of that cloud. They are terrified! And they will never be the same.

For the Peter, James, and John – they may not have said anything to anyone ... at the time ... but clearly this story came out eventually. And it was a memory seared into their minds.

⁵ Sarah Henrich.

For Jesus – this moment is a turning point, where his purpose gets real. Going forward, Jesus’ face is set on Jerusalem. His focus in ministry shifts, as he discussed with Moses and Elijah on the mountain. Some Bibles translate what Jesus is planning as a departure or deliverance. A more accurate translation is really “exodus” because “this word ... occurs nowhere else in the gospels [and] is too rich in nuance to simplify.”⁶ Exodus connects directly to “biblical tradition with the great liberation from Egypt, the greatest salvation story in the Hebrew Bible.”⁷ Jesus wasn’t planning his departure from Jerusalem like he was finding the right day, or deliverance from the Roman occupation or even his personal enemies. He was in conversation with Moses and Elijah about **his exodus**. The liberation **he would lead** for God’s people. A new way forward in freedom, an exodus from slavery to sin, breaking of the chains of oppression for humanity. “**This** characterizes Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension – events soon to happen in Jerusalem – as a **New Exodus** within the larger story of God’s saving purpose.”⁸ Jesus was in this Holy Spirit cloud of prayer – preparing for the great work to come, the work of salvation itself.

And for us? What does the transfiguration do or change for us?

You are welcome to contemplate that deep question long after this message is over.

⁶ Henrich.

⁷ Troftgruben.

⁸ Troftgruben.

For me, as we stand on the mound overlooking the season of Lent – I am deeply reminded of the power of prayer. Even for Jesus – who was so intimately connected with the Father – prayer is a **lifeline**. Prayer was the womb of Jesus' transfiguration, the catalyst, the hearth. Prayer matters. It mattered for Jesus and it matters for us.

I am reminded that mountaintops are not where we live. We are not called to stay on mountaintops and build shelter – but rather to come down with a new perspective of something we couldn't see clearly before, to give our lives to something bigger than ourselves, and to set our sights on God's call for us.

I am reminded that the work of the gospel is the New Exodus. The cross wasn't about saving ME. It was about US. Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension was about liberation for humanity. For all of us. And all of us are transformed by this good news.

Where will you go after the mountaintop?

Amen.