

THOUGHTS ON GOD'S PRESENCE AND HIDDENNESS¹

I think that the key, which unlocks this passage, lies in our paying attention to Peter's goofs on top of the Mountain of Transfiguration.

Peter's first mistake is in his proposal that the disciples construct three booths. The idea of a booth came out of Old Testament tradition. The problem was Peter's proposal that there be three of them. Obviously, the mistake here is that Peter does not yet perceive that Jesus, above Moses and Elijah is the focus and point here. One booth would have been better. But it still would have missed the point.

Peter's second mistake was that he spoke too soon. Impulsiveness was part of Peter's personality. And this is one of several instances when Peter's brain isn't running when he throws his mouth in gear. Basically, Peter speaks before the revelation, or intensification of God's presence isn't finished. Not only is Jesus changed into a glorious vision before their eyes. But God the Father speaks directly from an overshadowing cloud. The Father's one sentence instruction gives the disciples all they need to know. "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him." God the Father doesn't say build a booth.

Finally, Peter errs in the quiet assumption that the disciples need to stop their journey with Jesus in order to settle down in continual worship atop the mountain. Clearly, the proper response to what the disciples are experiencing is to keep on traveling with and learning from Jesus.

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The bottom line or simple conclusion is that the point of the hike up the mountain of Transfiguration and the revelation given at the top was to reinforce the disciples' commitment to walk with Jesus. "Listen to him" is the whole point.

There's something very important that you and I can take from this. The point of our faith; its core activity, is discipleship, namely walking and talking with Jesus. We need to be reminded of this again and again because we can miss it. We can get wrapped up in good things, like making this a better world or building up the institutional church, or getting the theology just right, or even having the ultimate spiritual high on top of a mountain. But these are all beside the point. They're good things. But not the main thing. The main thing is walking and talking with Jesus.

Think with me about the ways God makes himself present to us through life. We've all had times when God doesn't seem to you and me to be very real or important at all. We just go about living our lives. But we don't pray. We barely give God a thought. At these times, God doesn't do anything to gain our attention.

Now, theologians wouldn't want to say that God is not present. God is present in his mysterious being that we know nothing. And God is, as they say, "structurally present." That means God keeps the world intact. Creation doesn't maintain itself. God always needs to participate just to keep the world the world. Structural presence.

God is sometimes more intensely present in certain times and places. Maybe there's been a minister in your experience who carried God's presence for you. The Bible carries God's presence. The communion carries God's presence. Most of us will

remember a time or experience that God used to draw near and touch you. Montreat for some. We all have our personal experiences.

Now move up the scale. Some people have blazing, life-changing history-changing encounters with the sheer glory of God. This story of the Transfiguration is a prime example. What Peter, James, and John are going through is an exposure to God that is like being close to the sun. It's almost too wonderful, too intense, too much.

We can even imagine an intensification of God's presence that would destroy us. I'm talking about an encounter with holiness that would simply zap us. Holiness means separateness or difference. God is so different from you and me that we can't survive being near him.

So there's a range of ways that God can and has been present with his people. Now here's the surprise in the Transfiguration story. The best, usual way for you and me to be close to God turns out not to be in his blazing, holy, overwhelming reality but in the quieter, human presence of God in Jesus Christ. God as our friend, more than God who knocks us to the ground. Listen to him.

What all this says to me is that the quiet discipline of being a student of Jesus is yet the most transforming powerful meaningful one you and I could have.

Sometimes I run into nomadic Christians who are ever hunting for a new church, new program, new minister, new experience, that will help them have a more powerful sense of God's presence. But maybe the most satisfactory encounter with God isn't the most powerful. Or dramatic. Maybe the steady practice of spending time with

God in prayer each day, studying the Bible, serving in mission, going to worship,.
Simplifying our lives and so on is, in the end, the richest.

Compare what I'm talking about to eating. The best tasting foods invariably are desserts and meats with fats and sugars. Few things taste as good as bacon or chocolate. But the ideal diet is much more modest. When we're really eating for the long haul we're eating grains, vegetables, beans, and generally modest foods.

It's pretty clear that God provides for three of the disciples a uniquely absorbing experience in advance of the toughest leg of their experience with Jesus. The Transfiguration was God's way, Jesus' way of helping them through the very difficult journey to Jerusalem with Jesus' arrest and resurrection. The resurrection, by the way was very much like what happened on the mountaintop.

For you and me the lesson here is to hang in and press on. To walk and talk with our Lord. Getting to worship every Sunday, saying our prayers, taking time to be with Christ, serving in his world. It's not flashy or exciting all the time. But it's the everyday nourishment that gets us where God would take us.