

# Moses, Jesus, Transfiguration, and Us

A sermon delivered by Wendell Griffen, Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Ark., on March 13, 2011.

## **Exodus 24:12-18**

12 The 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.' 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To 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.'

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The 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. 17 Now 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. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

## **Matthew 17:1-9**

### **The Transfiguration**

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then 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.' 5 While 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!' 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not

be afraid.’<sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup> As 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.’

Most adults have experienced what might be called “life changing events” that are landmarks for us morally, physically, emotionally. Those adults of a certain age may remember growing up with parents and grandparents who spoke about living through the U.S. Depression that began in 1933. Others will remember where we were when President John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy were murdered in 1968. We remember where we were on September 11, 2001 when terrorists hijacked two commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Towers, crashed another one into the Pentagon, and were frustrated by heroic passengers who forced them to crash a fourth airliner in Pennsylvania.

Events like those are life-changing which may be another way to say “transfiguring.” We are accustomed to reading the transfiguration account concerning Jesus that we find in the Gospels and the passage concerning Moses on Mount Sinai in terms of the way Jesus and Moses physically changed. Matthew reports that Jesus’ face “*shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*” We focus on the physical change when we typically think about the Transfiguration. But larger, deeper, and higher dimensions beckon us.

**Following God involves relationship, not ritual or routine.** Following God is never about keeping a set of rituals, rules, and regulations, no matter how much we may value rituals, rules, and regulations. It’s essentially, fundamentally, and constantly about our relationship with God and what that relationship means for living.

The Transfiguration experience of Jesus, like what Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai, wasn’t about rituals, rules, and regulations. It was about the relationship between Jesus and God and the consequences of that relationship for how Jesus would live and die. Jesus climbed the mountain as part of his relationship with God, not to fulfill a religious ritual or comply with a religious regulation.

It’s important for us to remember that the relationship with God is not always experienced on the floor of life. There are valleys and peaks we must pass through with God. We do the divine-human relationship a terrible injustice when

we make it about rule-making and obeying. God calls us to live with God. God calls us to go into valleys with God. God calls us to climb peaks with God.

God calls us into a living relationship, and any living fellowship has peaks and valleys. The Transfiguration accounts concerning Moses and Jesus give us insight into two peak experiences. Moses received the moral law on Mount Sinai. Jesus received deeper and larger insight into his mission from God. The traditional view is that Mount Tabor, south of Nazareth, is where Jesus was transfigured, although the “high mountain” mentioned at Matthew 17:1 may be Mount Hermon, close to Caesarea Philippi. Moses and Jesus climbed their mountains in obedience to God’s call for greater living. We should expect God to make similar calls on us. We should expect to be called to places where God will raise our understanding and commission us for greater living.

**God calls us to climb and wait, wait and climb.** Exodus 24:12 reads: *The 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.”* **“Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there ...”** So Moses left the company of other leaders and climbed the mountain, accompanied by Joshua, his assistant. As he climbed, he was waiting for God. And after he climbed, Moses waited for God.

We shouldn’t expect to always follow God as part of a crowd, even if that crowd is traveling where God leads. There will be times when God will call us away from the crowd. There are times when God calls us to leave the hustle and flow of our company and companions and go somewhere else. And when God calls us to the mountain the invitation is to us, not our crowd. **Has God called you away from your crowd to climb and wait, wait and climb? Did you leave the crowd? Did you climb? Did you wait?**

Moses took Joshua with him on the Mt. Sinai climb. Jesus took Peter, James, and John. Joshua eventually became successor to Moses. Peter, James, and John eventually became leaders among the early followers of Jesus after his resurrection and ascension. Moses and Jesus took trustworthy people with them. We know they weren’t perfect. Joshua may have lacked self-confidence. Peter apparently had impulse-control issues. James and John seem to have been ambitious and power-hungry. But Moses took Joshua and Jesus took Peter, James, and John, on their respective climbs.

**Moses and Jesus left their crowds, but they didn't climb alone!** That means they didn't wait alone. They weren't having a private session with God, only a less crowded session with God. We shouldn't expect to always follow God in a crowd. But sometimes when God calls us away from the crowd we need some trustworthy companions. We need others to share our journey up the mountain. We need others to walk with us, wait with us, and listen with us. And we need others to be with us as we descend the mountain and return to the crowd.

Although we may invite others to join us as we follow God's summons to our mountains, we and they who join us must remember that God called us to the mountains. What God has for us on the mountain is for us from God. They may join us on the mountain, but that doesn't mean they are part of God's conversation with us.

And the invitation to join us on the mountain doesn't entitle anyone to set the agenda for what happens on the mountain. Joshua went with Moses, but Joshua didn't set the agenda. Peter, James, and John went with Jesus, but they didn't set the agenda, as Peter was reminded when he impetuously volunteered to build three lodges on the mountain for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. We should remember this when inviting others to join us as we obey God's call to mountains. And we should also remember it when we're invited to join others who follow God's call to their mountains.

**God calls us to be commissioned for greater living.** God called Moses to give him the law that would govern God's relationship with the Hebrew people. God summoned Jesus to prepare him for the sacrifice that he would make at Calvary.

In both instances, God's call involved a commission to greater living. God doesn't call us to "mountain" experiences to claim us, but to commission us. Moses and Jesus already belonged to God. They didn't need to climb their mountains to become God-loving, God-trusting, or God-following. God's summons to Moses and Jesus involved preparing them, instructing them, and sending them forth for greater living.

After Sinai, Moses was more than the fellow who led the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. He was the man who God commissioned to lead the people in living for God. After his transfiguration experience, Jesus was more than an emerging prophetic preacher and teacher. He was the man headed for a

showdown with sin and death at Calvary. Moses and Jesus were never the same after their mountain experiences because they were each commissioned by God for greater living afterwards.

**What “greater living” has God commissioned you to do?** What has God called you to do and be as a result of what you learned from God during a “mountain” experience? God calls us to mountains and away from crowds to speak commission words to us. We’re called to get new insights and new orders. We’re not called to instruct God, but to listen, learn, and be prepared for greater living. We’re called away and up to be commissioned and consecrated by God. We can’t expect to ever be the same afterwards. We’ve had a “life-changing” experience.

**For Moses and Jesus, “greater living” meant serving God through sacrificial living that affected others.** “Greater living,” in that sense, doesn’t involve personal glory, fortune, or power. God doesn’t call us, instruct us, and commission us for “greater living” so we can indulge ourselves with more things. We’re called, instructed, commissioned, and consecrated to become sacrificial servants for God’s purpose.

The entire message of Scripture and the central theme running through the life of Jesus is that God’s purpose is to restore humanity to God in “oneness.” God is determined to fix all that is broken in the divine-human relationship. God is determined to call us, lead us, discipline us, and sacrifice to reunite us with God. So when we’re called to mountains we’re called to get new instructions, hear new messages, and be commissioned to greater service concerning our role in God’s purpose of reuniting others to God.

The call to “greater living” is a call to sacrifice, not self-service or self-indulgence. It’s a call to service. We have no right to change God’s summons to serve God and others through self-sacrifice into anything less or else. When Moses and Joshua left Mt. Sinai, they returned to find their crowd worshipping a golden calf. When Jesus, Peter, James, and John left the Mount of Transfiguration, they found the rest of their crowd arguing with competing religious people while a man and his severely ill son were neglected. The first thing Moses and Jesus had to do when they returned from their mountains involved “greater living” concerning how our life with God involves others.

Yeah, I'm telling you that "greater living" for God always involves sacrifice that will deliver others. God is determined to restore unity with us. God is determined to right the wrongs that flow from the sin situation. So God called Jesus to show us what it means to live with God. In Jesus, we see that "greater living" means loving God with all our being and loving others as God loves us. In Jesus, we see that loving God means following God's call to mountains where God prepares us for "greater living." God calls us for transformative living. We called to be transfigured so we can make a transformative difference for God in people's lives.

Then God sends back to the crowd at the foot of our mountains. It's noisy and rough down here. But God doesn't call us to the mountain to merely get us away from the crowd, the noise, and the roughness. God calls us to prepare us for the kind of sacrificial living that Moses and Jesus made with their noisy and rough crowds. In Jesus, we see God sacrificing for us in a noisy and rough world, and calling us to follow God in the same "greater living."

Transfiguration is about more than a shiny face and clothing. It's about the transformation God does in and with us to commission us for "greater living" that is transformative for others. Let's obey God's summons to climb, wait, listen, and be commissioned so we can engage in that "greater living" to fulfill God's purpose of restoring humanity to God in "oneness."