

A friend of mine has been to the mountaintop.

In the Holy Land she ascended what has been identified as the mount of Transfiguration, and she confirms that it is very high and that even now, with vehicles and equipment, a daunting, treacherous climb.

It took a whole lot of trying just to get up that hill.

Yet Peter, James and John made it to the top with no incident.

Then, Jesus changed suddenly, and began to blaze and shine as high in the air and as blindingly bright as the sun itself.

Peter, James and John, who had never seen anything close to like this, didn't flinch.

Moses and Elijah arrived, appeared suddenly from the mists of legend and history, and stood there.

Peter was cheerfully chatty.

The mountaintop cloud overshadowed them, the vapor and lightning entourage of God Almighty, and Peter mused about whether there's room on this side for a little patio.

The climb, the dazzle, the prophets and the Presence leave the three of them utterly unfazed.

Then the Voice, which had to interrupt Peter, said,

*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*

*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear.*

It is terrifying to listen.

We know this, of course, from those times we stand on the El platform or sit in our car on the off-ramp and see the stranger with the cardboard sign approaching.

We consider whether to give her money, but we certainly aren't about to offer eye contact, which would be an invitation to conversation, putting us in the chilling position of having to listen.

The man carries that sign precisely so that he has a chance to say something, because he has learned how precious few have the courage to listen.

We might listen to the news, or sports talk or celebrity gossip, because usually they are safely about other people, and we can maintain an intellectual or emotional distance, an easy albeit indefensible disconnect from the commonness of our shared humanity.

We might listen to opinions, but we are loathe to listen to directions.

We might even listen to Scripture, equally detached, the literary record of a bygone era as interesting and engaging and distant and dead and gone as Moses and Elijah, but we shudder a little at the thought of taking it as seriously as those other Christians do, the judgmental ones who hurt people with their chapter and verse hatred and, in so doing, provide us the easy rationalization, the mental escape clause from the terror of really wrestling with a living Word from a living God.

That is what sends the disciples to the ground in overpowering fear.

The Voice tells them not to listen to Moses and Elijah, not to read their Bible or consult their tradition, their liturgy and their literature, but it orders them to pay attention to their friend, that familiar face on fire like truth, the man they think they know.

It is frightening indeed to listen to those closest to us, to see them with new eyes and to accept that they might be different than we have long since pictured and pigeonholed them to be. To think that God approaches now, here, in the people that we know, the people with whom we share the daily climb, that the glory of God can glow in the familiar, hangdog faces we see every day and that the truth we need to hear might crackle from their tiresome tongues is a lot scarier than we care to admit.

But it is not just the fear of the familiar transfigured into the transcendent that buckles our knees.

It is also this particular man, this Jesus, who turns this Shining into a horror movie.

It would be far easier to listen to Moses or Elijah or conventional wisdom or even a sermon.

The things that Jesus says make it petrifying to keep listening to him.

Our ongoing study of the Sermon on the Mount has left us at times in tears and at times in terror:

*Love your enemies.*

*Pray for those who persecute you.*

*Give to everyone who begs from you.*

*Do not worry about your life.*

*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...the measure you give will be the measure you get.*

*You cannot serve God and wealth.*

*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

And as Matthew's gospel continues, his words only get scarier, and it gets harder to *listen to him*.

Forgive the one who sins against you seventy times seven times.

Whatever you do to the least of these you do to me.

And of course there's what he has just said to his disciples, the insanity that came out of his mouth last week that they still can't get out of their heads.

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

*If any want to become my followers, he said, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

*This is my Son, the Beloved ... listen to him!*

*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear.*

Those three dwellings were a good idea, because there is nowhere to go from here but down.

Looming ahead, at the bottom of the hill, is the twisted mirror image of this scene, the Disfiguration of the Lord, where Jesus, witnessed only by three women with more fortitude than the mountain climbing men, is joined by two criminals and mocked for the claim he was God's Son under a cloud that is dark and silent.

Seeing it coming was enough to send Jesus himself to the ground in fear, face down in Gethsemane pleading with the Voice to *let this cup pass* as Peter, James and John slept in the distance, unable to *listen to him*.

This is where we are going: downhill into Lent, downhill into the dark truth about ourselves, downhill into death.

It is why Amelia and Lucas, if they have their wits about them, will scream bloody murder today, because bloody murder is what we will splash and trace on their tiny foreheads.

Today they take up their glistening cross and begin to follow.

*Do you not know, Paul writes, that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*

It's all downhill from here, kids.

But before you worry and wail, before you writhe on the ground in fear, remember what the Voice says.

The Voice, the same Voice that says of Amelia, *This is my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased...* the Voice that introduces Lucas, *This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased...* the Voice says to both of you and to all of us, *listen to him.*

And if we dare to look up, we will see only Jesus.

He comes in water and word, in wafer and wine and one another, and he touches us.

And he says, *Rise up, and do not be afraid.*

That is why we are named Resurrection, because he showed us how.

Lucas and Amelia and Resurrection, terrified children of God, *get up, and do not be afraid.*

Beyond the pain is the promise; beyond the cross is the living Christ, beyond the fear is a future ablaze with radiant joy.

Like your Lord Jesus, you will be transfigured into the glory of who you always have been and truly are.

You will suffer and you will shine.

And he will haunt you, he will hurt you, he will scare you, and he will save you.

*Get up, he says, and do not be afraid.*

*Listen to him.*