The disciples’ mountain top experience we call the transfiguration must have been something. Peter, James, and John, Jesus’ closest confidants, accompany him on a mini retreat. Then, as now, they go to the mountaintop for prayer. The disciples are on the verge of dozing off when a bright white light surrounds them, and they have a vision of Jesus talking to Elijah and Moses, the two greatest religious figures of their Hebrew faith. Then a cloud enshrouds them in darkness and mystery. Luke says they were terrified. A vast understatement, to say the least. They leave the mountain the next day ahead of Jesus, and almost immediately encounter a young man in need of healing. Perhaps feeling quite confident after their mountaintop experience, they try to heal him – and promptly fail. Then later in the day the disciples fall into an argument over which of them was the greatest.

Questions abound when we read a story like this. First among them is how is it that a person could be a living companion of Jesus, could accompany him to a prayerful retreat, have an experience of God more spectacular than anything George Lucas could imagine, much less execute – and still have an immature and poorly formed faith! And the second question to arise is, was their experience anything close to what we can imagine happening to us?

Does a mountaintop experience of God change lives? Do people still have mountaintop experiences of God? And if they DON’T still have mountaintop experiences, what makes you think they EVER had them?

I think the greatest divide in Christendom is not between “liberals” and “conservatives”, between Bible thumpers and social activists, not between high church types and low church types, not between protestants and Catholics. The great divide in Christendom is between those who affirm they have had mountaintop experiences and those who say I believe, but I have never had one. The usual way of putting it is to ask “have you had a born again experience or not?” Do you understand yourself to have come to faith through some singular, maybe even spectacular experience of grace? Or is your faith experience a series of unfolding events and “mini revelations”. Is your experience that “I have always believed. My belief has grown and changed, I have had my ups and downs to be sure, but I have always been on the trajectory of faith.” Or is your experience “I know that there came a time, a time I can remember, when my whole life changed. The only way to put it is ‘I became a Christian’. I came to faith. A faith that I have not always had.” OR, is your experience been “I have never been to the mountaintop. And I am not so sure I can affirm that God has ever been at work in my life or is at work in my life NOW.”

The transfiguration story expresses the dual conviction of the early church that while coming to faith includes some pretty amazing moments along the way, coming to faith is also a developing process. Even the founders of the church took a while to really grasp what faith was all about.

In other words, ENCOUNTERING GOD is a LIFE TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE, but there are many and varied shapes and styles for that experience. Some on the mountaintop. Some in the midst of ordinary, everyday life. Some in the valleys of life. Sometimes the highest highs come during the lowest lows. But the constant is the experience of the living God.
Encountering God may be a visual and auditory event as with the disciples of old. Or God may come to you as a quiet inner voice, as with the prophet Elijah. Or through the reading of Scripture. Through the hearing of the proclamation of the word. Or through an experience of the beauty, grandeur, and awesome power of nature. There is no one, definitive experience of God.

**Our encounter with God always takes place within the CONTEXT of our lives.** According to the gospels, the transfiguration experience was one of a series of defining encounters with the holy, and through those experiences the foundation for faith was built in the earliest disciples. Within the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the transfiguration story serves two purposes: to illustrate the spiritual blindness of the disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus; and to set the stage for Jesus to explain what his vision of faith is all about: faith is not about profound religious experience, it is not about who is the greatest in the eyes of God. *Faith is about suffering.* The transfiguration story begins, “About eight days after these sayings of Jesus…” And what were “these sayings”? **If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake save it.”** The experience of God on the mountaintop took place then within the context of the disciples’ daily life with Jesus and their growing understanding of faith.

So also, when we have an encounter with God, when we catch a glimpse of God’s glory, it occurs within the larger context of our ongoing lives. If you go on a retreat and find your faith renewed, or even feel like faith has been born anew within you, that takes place within the continual unfolding of God’s grace in your life. At first you may misunderstand the experience, as did Peter, James, and John. But even when you gain new eyes and discover new faith, the new creation arises out of your present life.

**Our encounters with God are significant steps in our life journeys. But they are not only the only steps.** Jesus did not stay up on the mountain forever. He came down and went back to his day to day work.

Oftentimes our encounters with the mysterious and holy don’t make sense to us until much later.

Like many college freshman and young people away from home for the first time, my first year in college was more valleys than mountains. Sometime that year I attended a retreat hosted by the chaplains. Up in the mountains, of course. The retreat ended up being a very disturbing stop in my faith journey. I can’t remember the details, but I think the theme was something about shedding the masks that hide our true identities. In any event, I left the mountain not refreshed and renewed, but drained and despondent.

It was only years later that I was able to process what happened that weekend. Able to put back together pieces of my self and my faith that became fragmented my freshman year.

Now, I don’t suggest my experience is normative. But I do think the very profound moments of life and faith take on new and deeper meaning much later. AFTER the event. NEW meanings in light of other events, persons, and faith encounters. In other words, some of our “born again” experiences only become “born again” experiences *later on.* After we have time to reflect and process what has happened and is happening to us.

This was certainly the case with the apostles. Peter, James, and John did not understand what had happened to them on that mountain, they did not understand Jesus’ teachings, they did not grasp the significance of Jesus life, until after Jesus had died. It was only through their faith that Jesus had been risen that they came to understand what Jesus meant when he said **If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.**
Of course, what makes mountain top experiences mountain top experiences is that we don’t have control over them. God comes to us; we don’t come to God. That is one meaning of grace – God invading our lives at unexpected and unpredictable times. Out of the chaos of creation, God speaks and sets the planets in their orbits and separates the dry land from the seas. Out of the chaos of our lives, God comes to us, God speaks to us, God overshadows us, God brings order and purpose and meaning to our lives, and clarity and vitality to our faith. God comes to the mountain.

We cannot conjure up now an appearance of God, but we can GO to the mountain. We can prepare ourselves for God. We can seek God out. We can open our ears to God’s word and our eyes to God’s presence, and our hearts to the life of faith. We can go to the mountain. We can set aside the time and space for God. You know, the ancients went to the mountain to find God, because they believed God lived in the heavens, and the mountain was closer to heaven than the valley. And they were right – not in a literal, spatial sense. But God is more likely to be encountered when we get out of our automobiles and turn off the computers and the televisions and pagers and cells phones and schedules that control our lives. For God operates on God’s time, not ours. And as long as we live in our time, and in our space, as long as we direct the pace of our lives, as long as WE are in control, God will be absent.

But when we stop and wait, when we stay awake in the silence, rather than drifting off in sleep or wondering into imaginary regions of our imaginations, whenever we wait for God, THEN we find God waiting for us. And through God’s fantastic and amazing grace, the holiness and wholeness of God, the power and the peace, the comforting and challenging word of God abounds.

Steven Spieberg’s film *Schindler’s List* is one of the most powerful films of recent years. The film traces the tragedy of the Holocaust through the life of Oskar Schindler, an opportunistic factory owner. Utilizing Jewish workers, Schindler apparently carried an uneasy conscience, all the while living a life of decadent luxury. The turning point for Schindler, the transfiguring moment in his life, comes when the Nazi Commander vows to eliminate all of the Jews of the Polish ghetto of Schindler’s factory. The storm troopers brutally round up the men, the women, and the children, beating and shooting. Schindler witnesses this terrible tragedy from a hilltop above the village – a small mountain. The film is shot in black and white – except for a tiny splash of crimson in this scene. Schindler and the camera follow one little girl dressed in a blood red coat, running for life in the midst of death. Schindler – as well as the viewer – is transformed by this transfiguring moment. And he resolves to live the rest of his life for “his Jews”, spending all of his ill-gotten fortune and risking his own freedom and life that others might live. (CF LA 7:1:56)

Friends: we are surrounded by the presence of God, enveloped in a cloud of his grace. If only we will open our hearts and our lives to Jesus Christ, the living Lord of life. Listen! Our Lord speaks. Listen! Our Lord speaks to you. AMEN.

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” 41 Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, 44 “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.” 45 But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.