

**Something to Hold Onto**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/2/25

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I always felt so close to God at camp. I would make promises to myself to keep it going, to try to hold onto that feeling by praying more, by paying more attention in church, by exchanging addresses with the other girls in my tent so we could write to each other for encouragement. And then inevitably I would go home and settle into the rhythm of the rest of the summer, and that feeling of closeness would fade, as would my resolve to read the Bible more or whatever else I had promised myself I would do. And then maybe because I have always been an overachiever, a feeling of guilt would set in, that I wasn't better at practicing my faith on a daily basis. And the guilt was accompanied by a wistfulness, that the same spiritual intimacy I felt at camp was not available in the rest of my life.

Now looking back on those experiences with the benefit of 20-something years of hindsight, my prevailing emotion is a different one – gratitude. Sure, the mountaintop experience didn't last, but no mountaintop experience does. They're not meant to. Instead I think about those weeks at camp and I am grateful that from a young age, I had regular experiences of connection to God and connection to my peers in Christian community. If I close my eyes, I can be back there around the campfire, sure of God's love for me and in love with all of God's creation.

In our reading for today, the disciples have their own mountaintop spiritual experience, literally. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to a high place to pray. As Jesus is praying, his clothes suddenly become dazzling white and his face changes in some way that Luke can't quite describe other than to say it's different than before. When Moses went up to the mountaintop in the Exodus passage Buddy read, his face became shiny, reflecting the light of God's radiance. But what happens to Jesus is more than that – he is transformed, or to use the theological term, transfigured, not reflecting but radiating God's glory. Suddenly Jesus is more than a man – the fullness of his divinity is revealed.

He also gets some companions on the mountaintop: Moses and Elijah, revered figures of the faith, both long dead. Moses was remembered for receiving the law from God while he led God's people out of slavery and through the wilderness; Elijah was remembered for his prophecy, continuing to share God's word with God's people while they strayed to worship other gods. These two paragons of faith appear, perhaps to reveal Jesus as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

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Naturally, Peter wants to stay here on the mountaintop – he proposes pitching tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. But instead a cloud covers all of them in darkness and the voice of God is heard, just as it was at Jesus's baptism, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And as abruptly as this revelatory spiritual experience began, it ends. Jesus, returned to his everyday human form, is left alone with his inner circle of disciples. I imagine that after the dazzling light of Jesus's radiance

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I wonder what Peter, James, and John understood about what had just happened to them. Luke reports that in those days they told no one any of the things they had seen. Maybe it felt too holy, too precious to share. Or maybe they just couldn't make sense of this strange experience. Perhaps the meaning of it did not come into focus until after Jesus's death and resurrection.

The transfiguration is an ineffable mystery for us, too. Exactly how Jesus's appearance changed, exactly what he talked about with Moses and Elijah, exactly what Luke means with his comment that the disciples were sleepy... we can't, we won't know much more about what exactly happened and what it all means until we ourselves pass into God's glory.

But I do think we can make sense of what this story is doing here. This mountaintop moment occurs at an inflection point in Luke's gospel. Jesus has just had a conversation with his disciples about his identity. In that exchange, Peter correctly affirms that Jesus is the Messiah of God, and Jesus's immediate response is to tell them for the first time that he will suffer, die and be raised. The road ahead will be difficult. If anyone wants to follow him, Jesus says, they must take up their cross daily and be willing to lose their lives for his sake. As soon as they learn this news, Peter, James and John go up the mountain with Jesus to experience his transfiguration. And just after they come down the mountain, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, the place of his suffering and death.

The transfiguration occurs just after Peter has confirmed that Jesus is the Messiah of God. Beyond knowing that intellectually, the revelation of Jesus's glory on the mountaintop gives Peter and the other members of Jesus's inner circle a visceral experience of that reality. They see Jesus in the fullness of his identity as the Son of God, fully human, fully divine. It gives them another way of knowing, an experience they can come back to, an image they can hold onto.

They will need spiritual strength for the road ahead. As Jesus has told them, the next stage of his ministry will be full of challenges, full of suffering. It will culminate in his death on a cross at the hands of an oppressive empire, abetted by his own people. What grace to have the mountaintop experience of the transfiguration – a clear picture of Jesus's glory, a confirmation of his true identity. Something to hold onto when the going gets rough.

What experiences of God's grace do you hold onto when the going gets rough? Times you knew God was with you; moments you felt deeply known, deeply loved; when God's glory peeked through the ordinary, connecting heaven and earth? Maybe you too went to church camp as a kid. Maybe you think back to a retreat or a mission trip you participated in. Maybe it's your wedding day, surrounded by a community of family and friends, or simply a Sunday in church when it felt like God was speaking directly to you. These are moments to be cherished, moments to give thanks for. And they are a deep well we can draw from when we face the challenges of life. Remembering when God has been with us in the past gives us hope that God will continue to be with us in the future.

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When Jesus and his disciples come down from the high place, they are immediately faced with a crowd full of people and a child in desperate need of healing. Nothing like instant confirmation that you're not on the mountaintop anymore. I bet Peter wished he had managed to build those tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Even Jesus is frustrated – how much longer do I have to deal with you people? he complains.

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**Something to Hold Onto**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/2/25

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