

Heart of the matter: Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

*“You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19b).*

The vagaries of the calendar and the cycles of the moon bring in an early Lent and Easter this year, and so the transfiguration has come early too, cutting short the season of Sundays after Epiphany.

Unexpectedly, we find ourselves back up on the mountain with Jesus. We were just there to hear him describing those who populate the kingdom of heaven. Now he returns, not with all the disciples this time, but only the insider troika of Peter and brothers James and John, the zealous sons of Zebedee, or “Sons of Thunder,” as Jesus called them. This time they are asked to see before listening, to see past it all—his words, his ministry, his teaching, his healing, his preaching, his popularity, his friendships, his prayer, his wisdom. Jesus invites them now to see through and beyond all that to something that can be apprehended most accurately not by ear or eye, but by heart and soul: his true identity.

“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

The transfiguration comes at a critical point in Jesus’ life, a point of major transition as he shifts from his active ministry among them toward Jerusalem, the place of his death and resurrection, the place where human and divine will intersect. And knowing how hard it would be for his disciples to understand this, just as it is still hard for us to fully understand, Jesus takes his closest disciples and heads up a mountain. There they come into the presence of God, and their hearts and souls are opened to see what their eyes can barely believe. Their friend and teacher, the very human Jesus, is transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changes. His clothes become dazzling white. They sense the presence of Moses and Elijah. And God perceives their fear and responds by speaking to them. God wants them to begin to understand how this Jesus, fully human, is also fully divine.

The story of the transfiguration of Christ functions, Henri Nouwen says, as something of an icon; it offers access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. There, high on the mountain, the familiar face of their beloved friend and teacher is revealed in a new light, and in that light their hearts can hear the voice of God saying: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Icons have long been important to the Orthodox churches of the Christian family. Painted in egg tempura on wood, these tools for prayer and liturgy most often depict scenes of Christ, Mary and the saints. Created according to rules handed down from generation to generation, icons are venerated as representations of the divine, windows through which the soul can see the realities of the kingdom of heaven. Their purpose, as Nouwen explained, is to pull one into the image in order to see through it and beyond it to the heart of God, to the reality of the great Mystery.

Matthew's story of the transfiguration becomes a luminous narrative icon, a painting in words that points beyond the text to the true reality of Christ, the light of the world. Its aim is to help us see beyond Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean, to see him radically transformed into the Son of God, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Only then will we begin to take in the foreshadowing of his resurrection and future glory.

Illumined by this new light, we can at last comprehend him as fully human and fully divine. We see through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible. This knowledge will change forever how we live, how we face death and how we begin to see beyond the grave.

And that changes everything.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," he had said on the mountain. The Aramaic roots of the verb for "to see God" evoke the image of a flash of lightning that appears suddenly across the sky. In the midst of the murky darkness of a storm, our world is filled with light and we see. For a brief terrifying, exhilarating moment we see clearly, face to face.

Yet these are very hard times in which to see clearly. A murky human-made smog of dreams deferred, of violence, confusion and fear stings our eyes and blurs even what is closest to us. Where God would bring light, we linger in the darkness of ignorance and fear. The Epistle is speaking directly to us: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the

morning star rises in your hearts.”

God’s gift is in the transfiguration icon, the lightning, the intense light that allows vision and insight. God permits us from time to time to see through to the heart of the matter. God permits us to see purpose and future, hope and possibilities for meaningful action and participation.

And God’s gift is that God is there, waiting to be seen. God is the reality behind the icon. The challenge to us is to be committed enough and bold enough to keep our eyes open and to dare to look, to pass through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible, and then to accept responsibility for everything we see.