

Memory sites

Perhaps the Ancient of Days took great pleasure in these light shows.

by [Patricia Farris](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

The transfiguration story is dramatically staged on a mountain peak lit with a bright, even blinding light. The mountain setting is familiar: as an Arizona native, the landmarks of my world were Squaw Peak, Camelback, North Mountain and South Mountain. Long before Christianity was brought to this lower Colorado River region, the native peoples understood that these peaks were the sacred dwelling places of their gods: Shiprock for the Navajo and Hopi people; Baboquivari for the O'odham; Picacho Peak, Pilots Knob and Muggins Peak for the Quechan people in the Imperial Valley.

"This is the place where I can listen to my maker," one tribe member said.

The ancient peoples of the Holy Land, another land of mountains, deserts and light, had this same sense of place and geography. They also understood mountains to be "memory sites," as contemporary French scholars call them. The sacred story of their people was enshrined in the mountaintops where the high heaven and the flat earth intersect. At these memory sites, their origins and the whole of their past were always available to them.

Our holy texts tell us that Moses entered the very presence of God, the Shekinah, up on Mount Sinai, and there received the stone tablets of the covenant. And when he descended, says writer Zora Neal Hurston, flakes of light were clinging to his face. Later, Jesus took his most intimate disciples up to Mount Tabor. Going up the mountain, he led them into the sacred history of their faith. He showed them how to listen to their Maker, and draw strength from the shared memory of God's presence in their lives. They even glimpsed the very face of God. There on the mountaintop, in the pure clear light at the mountain's peak, in that memory site, their eyes were opened to see the sacred light. It radiated from Jesus' face so that he shone like the sun and his clothing became dazzling white. The light poured out from within him

and its rays illuminated their hearts and minds and souls.

Perhaps the Ancient of Days took great pleasure in these light shows. This was, after all, the light created at the beginning of time, on the very first day, the light strong enough to separate day from night. God had seen that the light was good. So good that God had sent it to guide Magi from the East to the birthplace of Jesus, and then to transfigure the babe so that they could perceive him to be the Savior of the world. And that same good light had the power to open the eyes of the blind and herald the dawn of Easter morn. How God must love this light and all who receive it, sending it to shine over and over again on those who live in the land of deep darkness.

In 1640, John Donne preached: “[God] brought light out of darkness, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring; though in the ways of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintered and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupefied till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the Sun at noon . . .”

High on Mount Tabor, the light that transfigured Jesus was strong and clear enough to open the eyes of Peter, James and John and they saw that he was the Messiah. Overcome with fear, they fell to the ground. Reaching out to touch and heal them, Jesus gave them power to rise.

Annie Dillard notes: “The question from agnosticism is ‘Who turned on the lights?’ The question from faith is ‘Whatever for?’” The mountaintop’s holy light was meant not to dazzle or overwhelm, but to empower and set free. It was intended to aid those first disciples in putting into perspective Jesus’ teachings about carrying one’s cross, and suffering and death. It was meant to light the way of their journey with him to the cross and beyond. It enabled them to see in the dark by giving them the tools of night vision. Then they could rise at his command, like Lazarus, and pursue the fullness of life without fear.

In the transfigured face of Christ, God’s light shines in our lives as well. Through grief and fear, doubt and cynicism, violence and war, suffering and death, our way is illumined by the holy light of God’s presence and love. We first see it on the mountaintop, and we carry it down to the flatlands and even into the valley of the shadow of death. The light from above then glows within and gradually dissolves all fear.

The story of the transfiguration is a memory site for us. It is the mountaintop experience that illuminates the entire church year with the light of Christ's saving and resurrecting power. It moves us through Epiphany, then girds us with light to traverse the weeks of Lent. Now it will carry us from this mountaintop of healing illumination into the scorching glare of the wilderness of temptation.