

Altitude adjustment: Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

In the hospital emergency room, someone accidentally bumps into an aide carrying a bedpan, and urine sloshes onto the floor. After several hours of waiting, my mother is finally admitted. I pay for TV, but she does not have the strength to push the buttons on the remote. She can't find the red button to call the nurse either. She tells me that last night she was taken down to a dungeon where she lay awake in terror. Now she wonders why someone left a black Scottish terrier in the corner of her room. Despite the fact that I gave the doctor a detailed printout of all her medications, doses and times, no one bothered to give her the pill that prevents hallucinations and fear. My mother is in the hospital because unrelenting nausea has left her unable to eat or drink. The dementia comes from her Parkinson's, or from the medications that help her to walk. Or both.

I understand the weariness of the disciples on their trip up the mountain with Jesus. They must be exhausted by the nonstop demands of the crowds. Recently they were sent off with power and authority into the same needy crowds to cure, proclaim and heal. They've had an enviable run of success and have returned to tell Jesus all about it. But when he takes them to "withdraw privately" for a well-earned rest, they are interrupted by more crowds, and the work of ministry continues. It's been a long day and enough is enough. The weary disciples beg Jesus to send the crowd away. But we know what happens next—fish sandwiches for 5,000, or more like 15,000, counting women and children.

When they finally do get a day off, it doesn't feel much like a vacation. Jesus tells them about his upcoming "great suffering," rejection and death (treatment they can expect as well), and about his rising on the third day. I don't blame them for missing the rising part. When you think you're heading for the dungeon, anxiety and panic tend to block out everything else.

Eight days later they are still reeling and in no shape for mountain climbing, even if its purpose is to pray. Luke is the only one who mentions prayer as the reason for their ascent. Why can't they just pray where they are? If I am honest, on some days—even many days—the attempt to pray is a steep, uphill climb on weary legs. If

I make it, it's only thanks to the company I keep—Jesus, Peter, James and John—Jesus and the communion of saints, past and present.

Once on the mountaintop, Jesus appears to be doing all the praying. His followers can hardly keep their eyes open—another detail unique to Luke's account, which connects the mountain of transfiguration and the Mount of Olives, unlikely twin sites of glory's face and backside. But here, before sleep can overcome the three, they are startled by a flash of radiance. Jesus, who must have reached the summit as sweaty and dusty as they did, now shines with the light of heaven itself. The rough fabric of his clothing shimmers like a swath of sunstruck water. The disciples behold the glory of God. They see two men as well.

Luke identifies the two men as Moses and Elijah; appearing in glory, they speak of Jesus' departure, which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. The word *departure* comes from the Greek word for *exodus*, referring not only to the trip down the mountain and into Jerusalem, but to Jesus' death. Moses' presence makes the connection unavoidable; now Jesus will accomplish a second exodus, leading people safely through the waters of death, even as his own flesh is parted in waves of pain on the cross. But this talk of exodus and death in the midst of transfiguration is lost on the disciples.

Peter expresses the confusion of his stunned companions by suggesting that they arrange to stay on the mountaintop. Unlike Peter, I have found the mountaintop of this text an uncomfortable place, perhaps because, unlike Peter, I have not been there. Each year when this story comes up, I am eager to move off the mountaintop and down to more familiar terrain. I feel more at home when they're back down with the needy crowd.

All the transfigurations I've seen—and I *have* seen some—have been down below. There I have seen lives transfigured, demons cast out, children raised up. These are the transformations for which we work and pray and hope, the transfigurations that brighten our days with wonder and joy. But there are other days.

This year, I'm less eager to rush down to the bottom of the hill. I'd like to linger on the mountain. I'd like to listen to the voice that interrupts Peter and brings balm: "Listen to him," we are told. Listen for dear life. Listen to words of forgiveness and mercy, promises of paradise, words from the cross. Listen without ceasing, on the edge of glory and on the brink of death. *I beg you to look at my son*, a father cries

out, echoing another voice: *Here is my only begotten son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.* Listen on this hill and on another where darkness closes in.

When cures and healing are beyond our powers, when the shine on a loved one's face comes from tears in the fluorescent lights of intensive care, when the third day seems far off—on such days it is good to be in this story, listening to the voice that urges us to follow on, for the Word shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.