

February 7, Transfiguration Sunday: Luke 9:28-43a

by [Verity A. Jones](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

Peter, James, and John glimpse a bit of heaven up on the mountaintop with Jesus, according to Luke 9. With white lights and dazzling clothes, Jesus' face shines as brightly as the sun. Moses and Elijah are there as well—the great lawgiver and the prophet who was expected to precede the Messiah. It's truly amazing, spectacular. A glimpse of heaven—high up on the mountaintop, far away from the chaos and devastation below.

It sounds wonderful, this mountaintop experience. What might change if we could find proof of something up there greater than ourselves, greater than the suffering world below, greater than the war and famine and violence and fear of this world? Or what if we could just escape the mess and muck of human life down here, if only for a little while?

Some people try crystals or meditation to transcend the harsh realities of this world. Others try yoga or prayer. Some literally climb mountains to get away from the chaos of human life, to be nearer to God's peace. Other people mistakenly think drugs or alcohol will help them escape a world filled with pain and suffering.

For many people who cannot literally escape the brutality of their lives—for those whose communities are engulfed in violence, or for those living in extreme family turmoil—intellectual or emotional transcendence is a lifeline, a necessary tactic for survival. Anne Frank, for example, escaped the terror of being discovered by German Nazis by writing beautiful, heart-wrenching words throughout the pages of her diary.

If we could get a glimpse of heaven, if we could see something really spectacular, then instead of wondering, we would have proof—an experience that we could refer back to for the rest of our lives. I long to be able to say, “I am an eyewitness . . . I heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:18). That witness could also be aimed at helping others, like Anne Frank's inspiring words, or it could be like “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19). But my faith has

come instead through study, prayer, mission, and service.

When Peter sees Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus on the mountaintop, he offers to build three dwellings for them, a memorial to them. He wants to honor and preserve the moment forever.

But God stops Peter in the middle of his sentence: “While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them.” God redirects Peter: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” God cuts Peter’s transcendental moment short and points to Jesus in the flesh, God’s Son on earth. When the others look up again, the bright lights are dimmed. Moses and Elijah are gone. There is only Jesus, in flesh and blood, fully human, there in the mess of their fear and trembling, comforting them, preparing to endure the trials and tribulations of human life.

God is with us. Even though I have not experienced a mountaintop revelation, I can know that my God is near—down here, in the midst of my messy life. This Jesus, our Savior, did not escape even from human death. He chose to suffer the cruelty of crucifixion rather than escape to a mountaintop closer to God.

Peter, James, and John are not the same after this revelation. They come back down from their mountaintop experience into the cruel world that will kill their friend and leader, but they are changed by their experience. When Jesus was transfigured before them, the disciples caught a vision, a glimpse. They heard a voice. For one moment the tough crust of mundane reality was peeled back, and they saw Jesus as the long-promised Christ, the one sent from God to save them. When they walked back down the mountain, they walked into a very different world.

These mystical moments, when the curtain of the divine is pulled back and someone gets a glimpse, can change the way the rest of us see and experience the mundane world around us.

On the eve of his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. shared a mountaintop experience at the Mason Temple in Memphis. His testimony changed America. He concluded his sermon with a reference to Moses on the eve of his death. “I don’t know what will happen now,” said King. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. . . . And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

King's vision changed America. He gave us a wider vision, a new way of seeing reality, so that today we too glimpse bits of heaven, that promised land, down here in our messy, gritty world. We glimpse a time when people of all races will show love for one another. King was a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawned and the morning star rose in the hearts of many people.

Such visions fill our ordinary and mundane, sometimes painful and troubling daily lives with new meaning. They remind us that the God of heaven is with us here on earth.