

February 14, Transfiguration B (Mark 9:2-9)

Peter wants to capture that mountaintop experience forever.

by [Victoria Lynn Garvey](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue

On the night before his sudden and unexpected death, my father decided to show us some old family slides. An amateur photographer, he would make a pest of himself setting up shots: endless fiddling with light meters and mysterious f-stops and the placement of the scene just so. He wanted to capture me in all the glorious wonder of my fourth year, but all of his fussing to get the perfect shot would send me into a royal snit and meltdown. Nowadays, one of my fondest memories of Dad is of that night and his narrating our lives through a series of one-inch squares of celluloid. I would like to freeze-frame that evening, savoring it endlessly.

Most of us have memories like that, golden oldies from our pasts that we'd like to preserve (along with some we'd like to forget). But when we capture them in fixed form instead of in the living repositories of our memories, they can be oddly dissatisfying, quaint, not quite right when we revisit them. They are true and they're not. I love the old pictures, but I look at them knowing that they capture only a single moment seen through one lens and focused by one person's take on reality. They cannot apprehend that moment of life in its entirety. Nor can we stay in the moment they capture, however much we might want to.

Peter, James, and John, the same trio present in last week's Gospel at the healing and the hatching of a new ministry, reappear this week, privy to something extraordinary. Just prior to our reading, Jesus was teaching the disciples a new truth about the cost of discipleship; he was predicting his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Then he turned to the crowd and stressed the need for his followers to tread the same path he would soon tread. He then promised that there would be some among them who would not taste death "until they see the Kingdom of God has come with power." Six days later, Mark tells us, the transfiguration takes place. It is, perhaps, a miniature fulfillment of the prediction that precedes it.

Two of the great figures of Israel's history are there, joining the older tradition with the new: Elijah and Moses, both veterans of their own mountaintop epiphanies. Here is Elijah, the prophet promised to be a close harbinger of the divine in-breaking to come (Mal. 5:4-6) and a prefigurer of John the Baptizer to boot. Moses appears as well, he of another six days on a mountain before the appearance of God signaled by cloud cover (Exod. 24:16-17). These two, insists Mark, "appeared," an innocuous English rendering of a Greek verb that shows up in the Septuagint in this form only when describing a manifestation of the Divine. Later in the New Testament, it appears only when describing Christ's postresurrection appearances.

Peter, on that mountain, is as enthusiastic as my dad once was with his 35-millimeter and me. As reluctant as Peter was to consider seriously Jesus' pronouncement of those few verses above, he is that much more enthused about his mountaintop experience: he wants to capture it forever. *Let's settle in*, he says. *Let's stay up here where it's wonderful and safe and we'll never have to change.*

Perhaps it is for Peter a moment of release from the endless demands on his time, or a moment to forget his embarrassing gaffe just a few verses before this encounter. Peter could not stomach Jesus' prediction of his coming suffering and death, so he presumed to tell the person he'd just identified as Messiah how a self-respecting Messiah ought not to act (8:31). The voice from the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration, like the voice from the cloud at Jesus' baptism back in chapter 1, pronounces Jesus both "Son" and "Beloved," but here pointedly directs that the witnessing trio "listen to him!" It is not, I suspect, simply a suggestion for the future, but a claim that everything that Jesus has been saying must be believed and taken seriously. Take that, Pete!

Jesus' transfiguration is a clear marker in the Gospel's story. The preliminaries are over; there's more ministry to be engaged, but life is now changing decisively for him and for them even as they are caught up in this moment of transformation. From this mountain and this mountaintop experience, Jesus will set his face for Jerusalem and inevitably for his death.

Yet Peter is correct in another way. This is an extraordinary moment, a time set aside, an experience to be remembered. On this mountain, Jesus and friends are caught up in the illimitable. Here there is an intersection, if only for the blink of an eyelash, of God with the world. It is a "thin time," as our Celtic ancestors would describe it, when the boundaries between the visible world and the invisible become

soft and permeable, when the veil lifts just a bit. They also recognize that such experiences are to be treasured for the gifts they are but are also meant to propel them forward. This is not the time, finally, for the pitching of tents.

Our family photos document a portion of my life: from a pouting four-year-old on an overcast day to a beaming graduate on the cusp of a future of unknown possibilities. I think that's what my photographer wanted for four-year-old me: not that she stay trapped in time, but that she move forward, with a little help along the way.