



The Transfiguration

Brian Mattson - 02/15/2026

Mountains have symbolic importance in the Bible. They represent the place where the sky touches the land, where the spiritual realm meets the earthly realm. A place where the power and presence of God could be found. From the very beginning, the garden of Eden is described by the prophet Ezekiel as "the holy mountain of God." Abraham and Isaac encounter deliverance and salvation on Mount Sinai. Moses goes up the same mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God. And in our scripture for today, Jesus takes his inner circle—Peter, James, and John—up a mountain.

Mountaintops, both physically and metaphorically, have always drawn humans. The allure of adventure and accomplishment lives there. The emotions and perspectives at the summit are unique and long-lasting. And the journey to the top reminds us that we are capable of amazing things. It's long been said that life isn't always a *mountaintop* experience, so to say. There are valleys and deserts, rivers and seas. But all the same, we climb mountains in our lives to experience things we can't find anywhere else.

I've been to the top of a few mountains. The very first one I hiked was a lot harder than I was prepared for. I thought it would be like my adventures when I was younger with my family and scouts, hiking through the hills and hollers of the Ozarks, and up in the Rockies and Smokies. It was not. It was hard and a little grueling, but the feeling and view at the top left me changed.

In my late 20s, as a volunteer youth leader, I was drawn into to a conversation about hiking mountains with another adult. We didn't know each other well, but we became fast friends. Bill McCurry and I spent the next week dominating the youth in basketball and hatching plans to go hike 14ers. Do you know what a 14er is? I didn't until that fateful week in 2011. A 14er is a mountain over 14,000 feet in elevation, with Colorado having 58, the most in the US.

Following that youth trip, Bill and I convinced Matt Fields and Wes Buchholz to drive to Colorado and hike Mt. Elbert, the tallest in Colorado. Bill was the only one of us who had done a 14er before, so the rest of us had no clue what we were in for. I assumed, since I spent so much of my adolescence hiking, that this would be similar to those experiences. A nice day of hiking in nature. It was not.

Hiking to the summit of Mt. Elbert was strenuous and long, nearly ten hours to the top and back. It was so different from hiking around here. Most of our day was spent above the treeline, exposed to the sun beating down on us. We didn't have any time to acclimate to the elevation. We left Springfield at 7:30am on Thursday and started hiking in Colorado at 6am on Friday morning. I had a headache in the first 30 minutes. The weather was hot then cold. The snacks and water were there then gone. It was hard, grueling work convincing our legs to keep going after seven hours, all uphill.

If this all sounds terrible, I can assure you that it felt terrible at the time. Others in the party were feeling it too, except for Bill, the old man of the group, who was in far better shape than the rest of us. At one point near the top, I remember thinking to myself that if I stopped to rest I would probably never get going again. So I just kept trudging up, up, up. And then I made it. I reached the summit of Mt. Elbert, 14,438 feet above sea level. The highest point in Colorado. And all the pain and misery of the previous eight hours faded away. The sun felt warmer. The water was more refreshing. The snacks came straight from the heavenly realm, even if it was just a turkey sandwich.

The sense of accomplishment and the feeling of awe at the top were pretty amazing. We just sat there for 30 minutes enjoying the views and taking pictures, soaking in the moment of completion, forgetting that we still had to walk five miles back to the truck. On the way down, we awoke Matt from his short nap at a lower summit—which is a story for another time—and made it back to the parking lot in a few hours. On that ride back to the hotel, I was already thinking about my next 14er.

Today marks Transfiguration Sunday in many Protestant churches. A day we remember Jesus's journey up a mountain with some friends. The Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholics celebrate this day in August, but this event—the Transfiguration or metamorphosis of Jesus—provides a narrative and theological bridge into Lent, which starts next week with Ash Wednesday. The reason why is because the Transfiguration is a foretaste of the glory of the resurrection. This is a future-looking event for Jesus's inner circle to take with them, even after he is gone. Here's the account as written in Matthew.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they raised their eyes, they

saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

- Matthew 17:1-8

This is such a strange and mystical experience; dripping with symbolism and metaphor. As with most things in the Bible, the writers are trying to tell us more than just words on a page. There are plenty of hints as to what they are implying here. The location—a mountain—reveals the secret that this is not only a physical location, but also a spiritual meeting place. That place where heaven and earth meet.

The mountain also links this story to Moses on Mount Sinai. There is a period of six days before this event happens, just like with Moses, and in both stories there is a shining face, a bright cloud, and a voice from within it. Not to mention that Moses himself appears on the mountain—removing all doubt about the connections. And suddenly here comes Elijah, another character who spent time with God on a mountain, a great prophet of Israel. The gospel writer is intending for this moment to link the old revelations of God to Moses and Elijah—the Law and the prophets—with the new fulfillment of them in Jesus the Messiah.

During the mystical appearance, Peter does what we all want to do at those mountaintop experiences—he wants to stay there forever. He proclaims that it is good for the disciples to be there, and then offers to build tents or memorials or tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. But before he can even finish his thought, a voice from within the cloud speaks, “This is my son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” It’s as if God interrupts because Peter is focused on staying on the mountaintop at this divine encounter. *But that’s not the plan, Peter.* God says, “Listen to him!” Listen to Jesus. And not just listen with your ears, but listen and *do* with your life. *What was he just telling you, Peter? You’re going to have to go back down the mountain and into the world.*

To understand the significance of this change in the gospel story, we have to flip back a few pages, because the arc of Jesus's journey and his instructions to the disciples began to change right before this Transfiguration. This moment on the mountaintop is meant to propel Jesus, the disciples, and all who follow Christ into the future. But what Jesus requires is not easy. The first half of the Gospel of Matthew recounts Jesus's birth, his ministry, and his encounters with the scribes and Pharisees. But as the full realization of Jesus's true identity becomes known, the journey to Jerusalem marks a shift in the Messiah's work and teaching.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

- Matthew 16:21-23

Bold Peter, ever ready to be a man of action, is told to basically fall back in line. *You are not making your own path, nor are you dictating mine*, Jesus says. *This path before me is divinely directed*. Jesus shows what it really looks like to listen and follow him:

"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

- Matthew 16:24-26

These words from Jesus are meant for the disciples to hear, but they also foreshadow his next steps. This mountaintop experience is where Jesus's journey takes on greater intensity. On top of the mountain Jesus further surrenders himself to God's will, and in doing so is transfigured, transformed. Jesus's face shines like the sun, just like Moses after talking to God on Mt. Sinai, reflecting God's glory. But instead of giving people laws to follow, Jesus offers a life to emulate. And from here on out, it's a journey to a different mountain. This time to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. A journey that will ultimately cost his life. And in resurrection, Jesus's true glory will be revealed. This mountaintop experience is simply a foretaste of that reality.

When we climb mountains in life, both literally and figuratively, we go on a journey into the unknown and unfamiliar. Bible scholar Tim Mackie, says this: **"Climbing mountains is a way of opening yourself up to the other, to the transcendent. And you can't bring stuff up there with you, from your creature comforts. You're entering this other realm. And often, they're very powerful experiences, to be on top of the mountains. Transformative."**

And also, we aren't made to *stay* on the mountain. There is very real, hard, deliberate work that must be done in the valleys, deserts, and plains. Most of us are like Peter, we want to stay up on the summit. The purpose of these mountaintops, though, is meant to help transform us into and remind us of who we are really supposed to be. These encounters with the divine build our faith and strengthen our resolve to go back down into the world to love like Christ. It's the difference between simply living... and living an eternal life. A Godly life. Like Elphaba from *Wicked*, who we talked about a few weeks ago, we visit God on the mountains to change into our true selves. To experience real transformation.

Where have you seen God lately? That's one of the questions Pastor Lori used to ask in nearly every small group meeting we had here. So, have you seen God anywhere lately? Have you attempted to climb a mountain? The great

cosmic mountain on which God meets us? We aren't meant to stay on the mountain, but we should visit from time to time. Because after we make it to the summit, we are strengthened for the journey back down and out into the world. And while the way forward is no less daunting than the hike up, we are fortified for whatever comes our way. It can be hard work to find God sometimes. Especially if our eyes, ears, and minds are full of the terrible things around us. But, God is there to be found, no matter what we're facing in the valley. The sacrifice of time and effort to get to the mountaintop are worth it. I saw that at the top of Mt Elbert.

Someone else who was transformed by time on a mountaintop was Martin Luther King Jr. In a speech about the hard work of the civil rights movement—the fight for justice, equality, and freedom for all people—he explained that God showed him the mountaintop. And from the summit, he glimpsed the promised land. Glory revealed. But there was still work to get there. Marches, sit-ins, rallies, prayers, and papers. Hard work and tireless words. Necessary work to reach a promised land. Work that ultimately cost him *his* life. And because he got a glance of the future, he was willing to keep walking through the valleys and deserts, crossing rivers and streams, trudging up the mountains of life. I believe Dr. King was a divine reflection—a shining face—of God's call on our lives.

We do not know what the future holds, any of us. But we have decisions to make: Do we want our lives to reflect the life of Jesus, or do we want our lives defined by something or someone else? Dr. King wasn't perfect. Neither are we. But he encountered God on the mountaintop and was determined to have faith and follow the rest of his days. Picking up his cross daily. Denying himself. Come what may. He said this in his final speech, the day before he was murdered:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would

like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. 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!