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Go Tell it on the Mountain

by: Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio



One of the bible's names for the God is "El Shaddai" or "God of the Mountains." And from the very beginning of salvation history, we see that mountains are a special place to communicate with Heaven. Abraham ascends Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son (Gen 22). God reveals his name and to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 3). Moses later receives the 10 Commandments on that very spot (Ex 31:18). Elijah returns to the same mountain, also known as Horeb, to hear what God's "still, small voice" has to say (I Kg 19:8).

So it is no surprise that Jesus brings His "pillars" (Gal 2:9) with Him up a high mountain to experience a special moment of communion with the Most High.

It is this event that is commemorated by the Church each year on August 6. This Sunday's gospel tells the story. As tradition has it, Mount Tabor is the place. Rising from the plain of Jezreel, its summit provides a spectacular view of all of Galilee. But, what Jesus intends for Peter, James, and John to see is not the countryside. He wishes to provide them a glimpse of who He really is.



Jesus is a carpenter from Nazareth, true. He must have looked much like any other Jewish craftsman of that time and place. That much could be seen by the naked eye. But this exterior appearance of His ordinary humanity was a veil hiding something more extraordinary—His glorious divinity. So on Tabor, God pulls back the veil. Moses and Elijah appear. These heroes of old had long since passed out of this world and gone to God. So what does it say about Jesus' identity that they appear on His right and His left?

Jesus' clothes suddenly appear dazzlingly white, "whiter," notes Mark, "than the work of any bleacher could make them." The first reading tells us the significance of this. In a vision, Daniel sees a vision of the "Ancient One." How does He appear? With clothing that is snow bright. Then one like "a Son of Man" comes on the clouds to receive dominion, glory and kingship from the Ancient One.

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On Tabor, a cloud comes and overshadows Jesus and a Voice from the Cloud proclaims that this particular Son of Man happens to be the beloved Son.

What we have here is what is called a “theophany,” a manifestation of God. It is revelation, first of all, of the divinity of Christ. What The Creed says about Him could be viewed as a commentary on this very episode: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” But it is also a manifestation of the entire Trinity. The cloud that overshadows the apostles is the same one that overshadowed Mary. It is the glorious cloud of the Holy Spirit out of which the Father’s voice resounds. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, prefigured in Daniel’s vision, revealed in the Transfiguration.

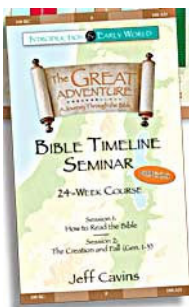
Suddenly, after a brief prostration, they get up and see only Jesus, looking the way He had always looked. The veil was now back in place.

The five senses are wonderful gifts from God. But they are limited nonetheless. Often we make the mistake of thinking that reality is nothing more than what our senses perceive it to be. So God gives us occasional mountaintop experiences, glimpses into realities that our senses can’t normally detect. Jesus is always divine, regardless of His everyday human appearance. Jesus is always accompanied by saints and angels even when He appears to be alone. It was the entire Trinity who opened the eyes of the man born blind, even though it was only Jesus’ hand we could see touching the man’s eyes.



Faith is remembering such moments of revelation and building our lives upon them. But it’s so much easier to forget such things and live according to what everybody can see.

This was originally published in the August 6, 2006 edition of Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection upon the readings for the Feast of the Transfiguration, liturgical cycle B (Dn 7:9-10, 13-14; Ps 97; 2 Pt 1:16-19; Mk 9:2-10). It is reproduced here with the permission of the author.



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