

When was the last time you were amazed? Can you bring it to your mind's eye?

When did you catch your breath – rub your eyes and find your mouth drop open with awe at the wonder of the event?

Where were you, and what happened?

For many of us, a moment like this may have occurred while we were in a place of grandeur or extreme beauty –people often say standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon on a clear day for the first time is one of the most memorable moments of their lives – they feel as though they really are in the presence of God.

For others, watching the actual moment of birth – of a child or even a puppy – is an awe-inspiring event. A new being, squirming and sticky – breathing on its own – fills many of us with a sense of wonder at the continuity of life and living things. A brand new life is renewing and hopeful, as is God's promise to us.

For me, a moment when I absolutely believed God was at work in the universe came when Don and I had an opportunity to go to Kitt Peak in Tucson for an evening with astronomers. As darkness fell, they gave us very powerful binoculars, and a tour of the night sky...

we learned about star nurseries and constellations...it was wonderful and you wouldn't believe what you can see with a decent pair of binoculars!

But the real “aha moment” came when we were escorted to a very large telescope and, after the astronomer made some adjustments to the machinery, I stepped up to the eyepiece and

saw Saturn with my own eyes – tiny, multicolored rings and all, hanging alone in the darkness.

It took my breath away.

My eyes welled with tears at the wonder of such a sight – and at the miracle of minds who could create the tool which allowed me to see it...real time, right now.

I was in awe – I was amazed – I was humbled before God.

When such an event happens in our lives, we tend to want to have some physical piece of it to remember it by – we want to hold onto the glow of the experience.

Have you ever noticed this?

We take photos and put them in books or frames.

We keep tiny baby clothes or ratty blankets to remind us of the times our children were so helplessly new. Somewhere in all my stuff, there's a little flashlight that shines only a red light – it was given to me by one of the astronomers so I could walk safely in the darkness at Kitt Peak.

The moments that overwhelm us are so rare, we seem to need to keep them alive – and holding a piece of that moment is human nature.

When we think about our scripture reading for today, I believe Peter, John and James must have felt their own version of awe when, with their own eyes, they not only witnessed a major change in Jesus' face and clothing as he prayed – but, they also saw Elijah and Moses - spirits of the past – holding conversation with him!

Now, they were already sleepy so we could say that they were having one of those “awake dreams” – but whatever they saw, they realized that this was a moment to treasure – a moment that may never happen again – a moment they couldn’t even share with others until years later, it was so astounding.

And Peter, bless him, wanted to keep it – he wanted to hold on to the glow, too – he wanted to hold on to the glory they’d just observed.

His first thought was to announce that he would erect a dwelling or tent in honor of each of the three esteemed men, and declare this moment a holy time.

It wasn’t a random idea – in the autumn, the Jews celebrate a weeklong festival known as the “Feast of the Booths” or “Sukkot” which is designed to mark the memory of their time in exile.

In Peter’s day, each family would set up a tent or booth, and then live in it and work out of it during that week. It is a time of prayer at Temple, a time of thankfulness for the harvest and mostly a time of remembrance of the Jews who similarly lived in fragile tents for years in the desert.

So in Peter’s mind, to put up such a representative village would honor the men who actually lived in that time...and others could come back to the spot to worship, if some type of structure was present.

Peter meant well, but as he spoke, God’s voice filtered to them, swirling in a cloud that scared the disciples – “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!”

Setting up booths was a nice idea, but God had other plans.

And the text says, Peter didn't really know what he was saying – he was so overwhelmed, it just popped out. We can understand how this might happen within the mind of a man so devoted to his Rabbi.

I know I've blurted out some crazy statements before I've had a chance to think about it...sometimes, our emotions lead the way!

So, it's likely that Jesus appreciated the sentiment of Peter's suggestion, but he also knew the glory they felt would be short-lived.

It's no accident that he invited these particular friends to share this specific time of prayer at the top of this specific mountain...to be part of his transfiguration, to witness his rising to yet another level of existence as God's Son and the Messiah.

Because his time to act out the true intent of his coming was looming in the near future, and there was work to be done. He would be leaving it all – the future of the new church – in the hands of these men - and they weren't ready.

Up till now, the disciples had been traveling along with Jesus, serving as hosts to the many meetings in the streets and on the hillsides, providing food for the crowds, serving as body guards and keeping some control over how large they became - possibly even watching out for spies from the leaders – those scribes and Pharisees of the Temple who waited to catch Jesus in some form of blasphemy.

It hadn't become clear to them yet, exactly what they would do as Jesus followed through on his life's destiny.

Up until this time, they were just along for the ride.

But only eight days before the amazing transfiguration, Jesus had tried to explain to the disciples how things would be –

“...if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

He'd thrown down the truth – “If you want to be my disciples, then you need to leave the old ways behind and do it my way...and it won't make you popular around here, especially after I'm gone.”

In other words, anyone who wished to keep their reputation in the Jewish faith could never be part of Jesus' tribe – the leaders of the church would be sure to reject such a person.

So, following Jesus meant giving up the comfort, security and acceptance of others – and in so doing, they'd lose what was known before, but in the long run, find something better – God's love and forgiveness. Jesus tried to tell them: “*Whoever loses his life for me will save it.*”

This was, at that time - and is now - a very tall order, one not easily filled by those who believe.

And the disciples probably didn't want to hear this message – in fact, it's more likely that deep down, they believed that somehow Jesus would pull a few strings, throw out some mystical tricks – and become the Savior who finally knocks a few important heads off to bring true peace to the people once and for all.

Remember, the Jews believed the Messiah would be like a great soldier-king, who would save them from the men who brought all the years of suffering and slavery.

Jesus was pretty impressive all right, but I bet there were quite a few in the population who held out for something more dramatic and fierce.

We really can't blame the disciples for being influenced by their time and situation, because in our own time, we're looking for the same thing. It's human nature to wish for a hero who will help us fix our lives - and this is what the Jews were waiting for.

It's also possible they may have even been a little disappointed that Jesus was such a quiet and gentle person who worked differently – who told stories and demonstrated what he wanted people to do instead of grabbing a sword and swinging away. He wasn't exactly what they'd imagined...

But as each day brought Jesus closer to the end of his time with them, he felt the pressure of responsibility.

Jesus knew he would never be the warrior-messiah the people were looking for, and he also knew the disciples needed to understand and accept what their roles will be.

In a commentary from Bible Gateway's Intervarsity Press, theologian Darrel Bock says, “Jesus is not the messenger; he is the message. The burden of the rest of Jesus' ministry is to show how that message will be delivered and who the message bearer is....Jesus is always reminding them that the divine call involves service and witness, not the raw exercise of power. The disciples won't be standing toe to toe with others in conflict of battle to win people over to God's side. Their ministry will become not one of power and privilege, but of humility and service; people will be won over and served, not coerced.”

Knowing this, Jesus needed an amazing event to bring them along – to show them who he was, to give him more status in their eyes and strength as he represents God’s Way.

So he took them to the mountain top for a different view of the ministry...

This is new territory for everyone, and thus, the Transfiguration – a very visible, impressive display of God’s trust in and love for the Son.

Before their eyes, Jesus changes from the guy who can speak to crowds of people and do some decent miracles to God’s Son, Messiah of this world, and yet, not of this world – glowing with faith, keeping company with saints – awe-inspiring, scary and full of glory.

Jesus embodies the unmistakable power of God, and Peter, James and John are dumb-struck by it.

It is life-changing - from this moment on, all the disciples will be in training mode – because God said, “Listen to him.”

And Jesus will spend the next many weeks working hard to instill a sense of servant-hood in the hearts of his twelve friends.

During this important time of preparation, Jesus will reveal more truths. After spending their days with the multitudes healing and working miracles, he will force them to find a quiet place to sit at his feet and learn before the end comes.

So what can we take away from this Scripture? I can think of a few examples...

We can start by recognizing ourselves in the lives and actions of the disciples – we bumble along, much like they did – and we also need God’s love through Jesus’ influence and sacrifice to live in our world.

We can realize that when we witness the intensity and awe of Jesus’ Transfiguration ourselves, we can’t pitch tents to keep the glory of our own moments on the mountaintop. However, we can hold God’s love close to our hearts – and that love can guide our actions with all we encounter in our days.

We can accept that the light of Jesus’ Transfiguration may reveal more than we can bear to see - we may want to run away in fear of such glory because we don’t feel worthy and we don’t quite understand what our roles are as disciples of this Jesus.

So as we move into the season of Lent and the days of self-reflection and hope, we should take more time to sit at the feet of the Rabbi and just listen, because God calls us to serve with humility and joy.

We’ve been provided with a very patient, worthy teacher, and we have much to learn.

Amen.