

Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

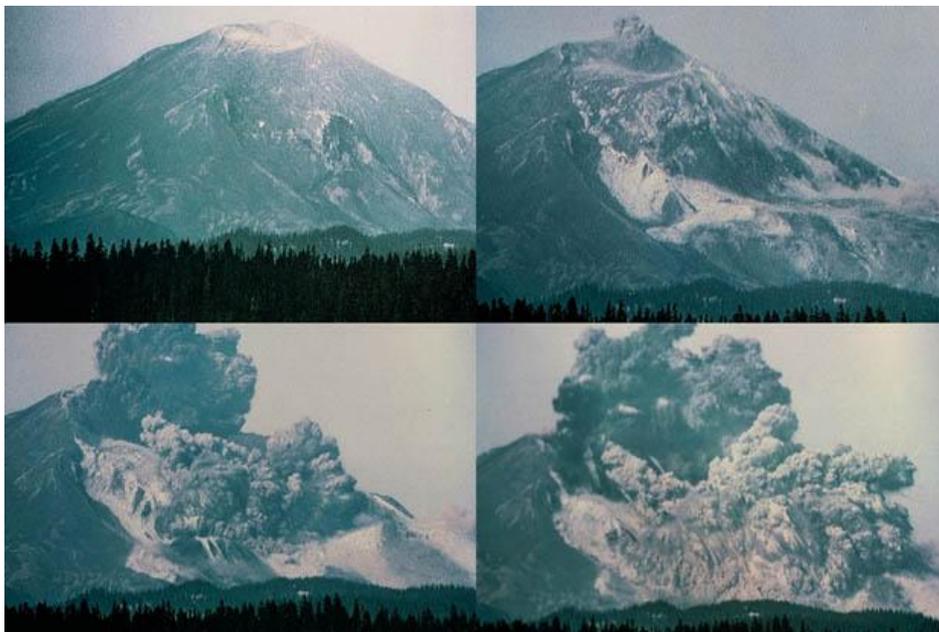
Matthew 17:1-9

¹Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Climbing a Volcano



The picture above is of Mt. St. Helen when it erupted on May 18th, 1980. It was taken by Robert Lansburg who was about seven miles away from the mountain when it erupted. Lansburg himself did not survive the eruption; after taking these photos he placed his camera in a bag and lay on top of it. Lansburg was incinerated by the ash cloud, but the film survived even though it was damaged by the heat. The pictures below were taken by Gary Rosenquist, who was ten miles away from Mount Saint Helen when the eruption occurred. He survived to talk about the experience. A lot of difference three miles can make.



In a sense, we look upon God as a volcano, don't we? Like Robert Lansburg or Gary Rosenquist being drawn to Mt. St. Helen's even after it was determined to be an active volcano, we are drawn to God even though we're not at all sure how safe the ground is that we're walking on. Like an active volcano, **God is both awesome and frightening**. We see this in today's scripture passages – the story from Exodus about Moses up on Mount Sinai where the presence of the Lord was like a devouring fire, and the story from Matthew where Peter, John and James witnessing Jesus being transfigured and hearing God's voice telling them to listen. We are in awe before the presence of God, and one impulse draws us closer while another tells us to seek cover, or just stay away completely.



Yet here we are, in a church, drawn to God. Granted you're not likely to see explosions or be devoured by fire in this church – our boiler is regularly inspected and declared safe. But in a greater sense our coming to church indicates that we are drawn to God, and anyone who has spent any time seeking God knows that sometimes the ground can get a little shaky when we are close to God. That's how it must have felt for Moses. What started as a journey into the wilderness to find a lost sheep led him to a curious little burning bush which eventually led him to a life spent always on the brink of disaster, from making audacious requests to the most powerful man on earth to wandering year after year in a wilderness where food and water were scarce, where the crowds who followed him into the wilderness were ready to turn on him. That's how it must have felt for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who could not do what so many pastors were doing at the time, which was to acquiesce to Nazi rule. Eventually Bonhoeffer became an outspoken and active opponent of the policies of Adolph Hitler and ended

up in Flossenburg concentration camp where he was eventually executed. That's how it must have felt for Peter and James and John who began simply by following an itinerant Nazarene preacher/healer, then came to believe that this preacher was the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for, then watched as he was arrested and executed in Jerusalem, and were finally convinced of his resurrection and spend the rest of their lives in harm's way, actively preaching that Jesus is the Son of God. Yes, this place may seem relatively safe to you at the moment, but how long until you too are drawn into some ministry that takes you far from comfort and safety?

It's a slippery slope you're on, coming to church and all. You start off as a curious spectator, and before you know it you're on a hike to a smoky mountain. Believe me; it can happen! It was a little more than twenty years ago that I started going back to church after nearly as many years not going. It was only about seventeen years ago that someone asked me to teach Sunday School and like a dummy I said yes. And now look at me – no one I see on a day to day basis can be completely relaxed around me; I'm a *pastor, for God's sake (literally)*. I have to be careful what I say and who I say it to. It's not much better for you, really. Word gets out you're a Christian and God help you with the scrutiny you'll fall under. Yes, the closer you get to that volcano the greater the danger you're in. You will hear friends telling you, "Turn back!" People will think that you're getting fanatical, especially if you go to church on some day other than Sunday. Yes, as you hike closer to that volcano, you may note that fewer and fewer people are hanging around you. Sure, you still live in the same neighborhood and work at the same job, but you are in a new place *spiritually*.

And you likely will not go back. You've been in your safe place long enough, and you realize that there is a price you pay for trying to stay away from God. While Moses was up on the mountain for forty days, and forty nights, the people below decided it was time to switch allegiance to a new leader and a new god, to go back to the good old days. We've been there, worshiping our golden calves, living a life of revelry, obsessed with satisfying our own lusts, but then one morning you wake up feeling empty, you look at that volcano off in the distance, and you start walking, and when you reach the base of that volcano you start climbing, and from a height you can look back, look down to where you once were, and you see that place from a whole new perspective. Now you can see it from above, from a place that is closer to God. And from you are you realize that the people down in valley are running in circles and getting nowhere.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. We usually think of Jesus being transformed up on that mountain, but like Peter and James and John...and

Moses, we are transfigured. The closer to that volcano we go, the more we see the glory of God, and what we witness changes us forever. How many of your friends who knew you before you started to church have seen the change in you? You see the closer we get to Jesus, and the more he becomes transfigured in our eyes from ordinary man to Son of God, the more we too are transfigured, the more our faces shine.

But we're not called to pitch our tents on top of the volcano. We're called to return to the valley, to our ordinary lives, but now we are called to witness what we have seen, what we have experienced. Our eyes have seen the glory, and now we must tell others. We're about to transition into Lent. Wednesday, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lent season as it marks Jesus' walk to Jerusalem. It's a transition when we not only look at the requirements of discipleship but the potential cost of discipleship, that potential cost being the cross itself. We are reminded of our mortality, that life, one way or another, comes to an end. But we are encouraged by the glory that we have seen in Christ, by a glimpse of what is to come. Let us move forward in this Lent season, and throughout our lives, to be so inspired by that glory to shine like a light to those in darkness.