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HE LED THEM UP A HIGH MOUNTAIN

This reflection is dedicated to the nuns at Transfiguration Hermitage in Thorndike, Maine.

The mystery of the Transfiguration begins when Jesus takes “Peter, James, and his brother John up a high mountain off by themselves” (Mk 9:1) Two mountains in the Holy Land have claimed to be the location of what was to occur that day: Tabor and Hermon. In a verse of Psalm 89, we find the two together. “Tabor and Hermon rejoice at Your name” (12). A tradition reaching back to the fourth century has assigned the event to Mount Tabor which rises in a round bare hump, about 1900 feet high above the Galilean plain. It seems a fitting place with its magnificent views including the whole Jordan valley. But in Christ’s time a Roman fortress and garrison were situated there. Many scholars today consider Mount Hermon as the favored site. It rises 9000 feet, taking about six hours to climb. Luke’s account tells us “Peter and those with him had fallen into a deep sleep” (9:32). After such an exertion, sleep would have come readily as it did to the three apostles who awaked to see Moses and Elias talking with Christ. Jesus and that favored trio came down the next day, which suggests a very long descent. Where the Transfiguration took place did not matter to the evangelists. Everything focuses on what happened. Jesus “was transfigured before their eyes, and His clothes became dazzlingly white. His face became as dazzling as the sun, His clothes as radiant as light” (Mt 17:2).

Spiritual writers using this incident for instruction have emphasized the exertion required to reach the summit of the mountain. Jesus reveals His glory to us after long toil and moral struggle. In the school of St. Maximos, we find the words, “The Lord does not always appear in glory to all who stand before Him. To beginners, He appears in the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). To those able to follow Him as He climbs the high mountain of His transfiguration, He appears in the form of God, the form in which He existed before the world came to be (Jn 17:5).” In this teaching, we are told that Christ comes in many guises. If we could choose, we would want always to be on a high peak above the everyday struggles going on in the plain below. To be there with Jesus far from the surge of human needs is to dwell in a serene apartness. Who would not want to build a tent there as Peter suggested? The text of Maximos goes on to say “that the same Lord does not appear in the same way to all who stand before Him, but appears to some in one way, and to others in another way, according to the measure of each one’s faith” (St Maximos the Confessor in a volume of *The Philokalia*).

Peter, James, and John who woke from sleep now see the transcendent illumination of Jesus. So often in our own lives, we can be slumbering spiritually. Christ comes to us in a special grace of awakening that arouses us. Till now closed and unseeing, our eyes open up to new possibilities for ourselves and for others. Human life can hold many awakenings, some of them small but others at times, very profound. We see Jesus as we

have not seen Him before. He invites us to enter into the light that radiates from Him. We may be blessed with transcendent moments that lift us to a high peak of understanding and love. We should cherish these special visitations and let our memory hold them like a treasure.

Then as with Peter, James and John, we are led down the mountain to find crowds awaiting us. These crowds are tasks to perform, requests for help, criticisms to deal with. So much is asking for our attention. Now we can face it with the power of the peak experience that let us see the face of Jesus shining like the sun in our lives. That remembrance of hours of glory never left the apostles. It strengthened them for days of horror so soon to overwhelm them in Christ's passion and crucifixion.

All three synoptic gospels describe what took place on the holy mount. John's does not mention it but the evangelist's account of the Last Supper records Jesus speaking to His Father, "I have given them the glory You gave me." We have not been favored with that luminous vision granted to Peter, James, and John. But we hear Jesus speaking of us when He prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to behold the glory You have given Me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17:24).

With eyes of faith, we see His glory poured out on a world that seems at times plunged into blackest night. Jesus, help me to be always aware that You have overcome the darkness everywhere.

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