

**A Mountain Mystery**  
**By Rev. Todd Farnsworth**  
**Luke 9: 28-36**



*About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. **29** As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. **30** Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. **31** They spoke about his departure, [a]*

*which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. **32** Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. **33** As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.) **34** While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. **35** A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” **36** When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.*

I'd like to take a walk with you today. I know it's icy in spots around here, but we're going up onto the mountain with Jesus, so I think we'll all be ok. It's either Mt. Hermon or Mt. Tabor. On the mountain, it's pretty nice today. The air temperature is in the mid '50s-'60s. And the sky is blue with a few puffy clouds. The sun is shining as we head up the mountain to pray. Maybe you can feel the grass and the stones underfoot as we zig zag up the hill. There are birds chirping and the low hum of friendly conversation as we make our way along the path. It's a good day to be with Jesus and his pals. And we've been traveling for a bit now, and we notice that Jesus

has broken away and has begun to pray. We're feeling a little weary from the journey so we watch him. It is so peaceful as we look around us. Are we falling asleep in the warmth of the grass? Our eyes are getting heavy...

Jesus is praying. It's ok...when all of a sudden there's a flash! Not a flash, but a light. It startles us, and catches our attention and it's coming from the direction of Jesus and there are now two people who remind us of Moses and Elijah with him...but how can that be? They are long gone and, they are talking with Jesus...can't make out what they are saying...we lean in to catch a snip of the conversation...one of us calls out, "*Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*" We don't know what we're saying. We're overwhelmed. We just figure we ought to do something in this monumental moment! But wait, now a cloud is covering the sun...and the sky is growing dark, but not so dark because the cloud carries it's own light from within, and that doesn't make sense, and now we're feeling a bit uneasy because what can this mean??? I mean, it usually means that God is near, but we're not supposed to see God, right? God is too glorious, right? And the cloud illuminates our friend Jesus. His clothes shine a brilliant white and the other figures fade away. It's just Jesus now. Shining before us. And a voice comes from that strange, glowing cloud, and the voice says, "*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*"

And just like that, the cloud evaporates, the birds resume their chirping, and Jesus is standing before us. His face aglow from prayer. And we don't know what it means, but we're glad we were here to witness it. And we

don't even have words to explain it, but it happened. Something happened. Prayer happened. And we head back down the hill with Jesus, wondering about all that we experienced.

Sister Wendy Beckett describes prayer as God gazing at us in love and taking possession of us. She says, *"How God gazes is not our business. We are only asked to allow Him to take possession. We cannot hasten or control this state. Certainly a response is called for, but what that is to be is something that only the individual as prayer can know. There are no norms, no rules, no prohibitions, or at least, none as such. What "rules there are arise spontaneously in the act of prayer. All prayer demands that we look at God, (which usually means we look into "nothingness", God being pure Spirit and unconfined in any image) and do what seems to work... Prayer is based on being truthful."*--*The Gaze of Love* page 10

What she is describing is the stuff that the disciples experienced on the mountain. It is less about knowing than about recognizing what we don't know and allowing God to fill in the blanks of our experience of the Holy. it's about "listening" or experiencing God's glory in the cloud of our unknowing. Sister Wendy describes being present to God and attentive to God's presence in the moment. The mystics call this "apophatic" prayer. A prayer of nothingness. A searching without looking. Allowing ourselves to be embraced by something, someone who is other than us...which goes along with the theme of Valentine's day as well as Transfiguration Sunday! It takes some practice.

Sister Wendy notes that there are lots of ways to practice this apophatic prayer. Some will sing. Some will walk in nature. As an art historian, she turns her gaze to art and allows God to speak to her through the works she contemplates. I'd like to show you some pieces to practice on this morning.

They are all by the artist, Robert Duncanson. Robert Scott Duncanson was perhaps the most accomplished African-American painter in the United States from 1850 to 1860. He was born in Seneca County, New York, in 1821 to an African-American mother and Scottish-Canadian father.



Let's take a walk up one of Robert's paintings with Jesus. It's entitled, *Landscape with Rainbow*. Take a deep breath and let the image soak into your bones. Allow the colors and the shading to embrace you. Where is the sun? Why did he put the clouds where he did? What is Jesus saying to us in this painting? Like the disciples before us, let's listen to what God has to tell us in the experience of this piece of art.

Now let's try another. This one is called, *Pompeii*.



Having just heard the story of how Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, what do you see in this painting? When are you? Where is God? How is God gazing at you while you look through this window? Which colors are calling you?

And finally, a non landscape painting by Duncanson: Fruit piece. This one might awaken your sense of smell, or taste as you let your eyes move

around the composition. Can you taste the sweetness of the Lord? What is



true about your relationship with God in this painting? What discovery does Jesus have in store for you? Listen.

Sister Wendy notes that before we pray, we can take some time to enter into silence for a short bit, just rest in God as we come to receive God's love. She says that taking time with scripture and trying to understand it with the use of study guides is helpful, but *"ultimately our concern here and now is the actual time we set aside to grow in truth, to receive love, in other words, to pray."*

I hope that in this wintry week ahead you take time to go up a mountain with Jesus and pray, be found, experience the gaze of God's love for you. We are God's valentines. Amen.