

A modern myth, that our schools teach as fact, asserts that our ancestors derived their sense of importance from the belief that they stood at the “center” of the universe. But then along came brave scientists like Copernicus and Galileo who challenged that view by arguing the earth revolves around the sun. This especially upset tradition-bound religious leaders because, according to the myth, it meant the universe was not “human-centered.” As science marched on, astronomers discovered that our sun is just an average star, one of a hundred billion stars in a single galaxy, which is itself one of a hundred billion galaxies in a large, very old universe. Thus, unlike the medievals we know how insignificant we are.

I call this a myth because it is untrue in two basic ways. First, while ancient peoples did not have telescopes and other instruments to measure the universe, they knew it was incalculably immense. For example we hear God promise Abraham that his descendants will be “as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore.” The ancient Greek astronomer Ptolemy's said that the earth in relation to the distance of the fixed stars is as a speck of dust when compared to the immensity beyond. Modern science didn't discover how small we are.

Second – and most important – the ancients did not consider the “center” a privileged position. Rather, the earth was not so much the “center” as the “bottom” of the universe. The saints and angels dwell with God in the outer spheres, but the earth was literally the bottom of the barrel, the slums. Long before Copernicus we knew that we were small and insignificant and that something unimaginably greater lies just beyond our reach.

We have always known that the world is much more amazing and filled with wonders than just our daily existence.

About 75% of American report a having had an experience when they knew that, felt that. In life we experience moments when we seem to be aware of more than what our eyes can take in. I remember being on top of one of the Swiss alps on an unusually clear day – with towering mountains as far as you could see, it was easy to feel powerless and weak. I remember standing at the foot of the great pyramids outside Cairo, staring up at something that was 1000's of years old when Cleopatra first saw it, and I felt myself to be in the presence of something almost timeless. I remember a remote deployment far from the lights and pollution of civilization and staring up at a night sky that seemed to have 10 times more stars than I remembered and it was easy to be in awe of how immense that universe is.

We remember moments like that and how they felt and how we didn't really want to let them pass. That inner longing has a purpose. God placed it there to wake us to something beyond this world. You notice today that after the three disciples received a glimpse of Jesus' glory, they fell silent and did not tell anyone what they had seen. This is not because they were introverts. They were normally quite talkative - especially Peter - but they fall silent. They saw something beyond words: a distant place, a future made present in Jesus. It was both hard to express and easy to misunderstand. In fact, the transfiguration is moment that the disciples won't talk about until after the resurrection. It's as if they experienced something that they weren't meant to see, or at least something for which they as yet had no words.

Eventually they would describe it but with very carefully thought out imagery that is especially clear in Luke's gospel. Notice particularly that Luke tells us Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about his "exodus, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." Certainly Moses more than anyone else would be able to talk with Jesus about an "exodus" -- so much wrapped up in that one word.

Exodus recalls the salvation of Israel on the night of the first Passover and the departure of the people from slavery to freedom as they passed through the Red Sea. By using this word Luke is suggesting that the death of Jesus, which will also occur on Passover, will set the people of God free again, this time from the slavery and bondage to our sins.

Why was Elijah the other person in the conversation? Jesus had recently been telling his disciple that the end was near. And just the day after this Transfiguration experience, Luke tells us “when the days drew near for him to be *taken up*, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem”. In case you don’t remember the story of Elijah, he was a great prophet who reached the end of his days but didn’t die. In a fiery chariot Elijah was “taken up” by God to return again someday. It makes sense that it would be Elijah who would be talking with Jesus about his own impending “taking up” moment on the cross and it hints that he too would not simply die but return again.

It probably took a couple of decades before the disciples found words to hint at what they experienced: Moses, exodus, liberation, Elijah, escaping death, being taken up to God. Just as any awe inspiring experience usually leaves us speechless at first and only later are we able to give some inadequate hints at what it felt like.

The most obvious and yet the most subtle clue to explaining the event is the luminous aura that surrounded Jesus on that mountaintop. Just as Moses glowed after seeing God face-to-face, this was an external manifestation of Jesus’ ecstatic union with his Father. It also says that God's plan of salvation--God's ultimate exodus-- is about to take place through Jesus; his death, his taking up, will be the final act of liberation. His acceptance, His loving vulnerability thus becomes the surprising vehicle for God's power to save the world. In effect, loving concern for others is revealed as the only power with lasting results.

This kind of loving vulnerability does not mean that we are called to be passive or compliant. In fact, this kind of love is persistent and relentless at the same time that it is gracious and sensitive. It comes from a passionate commitment to the ideal of **love received and then offered to others**. The only true source of freedom is unselfish love, and the only valid purpose of such freedom is to enable one to love others so that they also may be free.

The image of the transfigured Jesus represents the full awareness of this incredible plan of God. And when the voice from heaven commands us to "listen to him" we are challenged to be transfigured by our own union with God's plan of salvation as we become more and more ready to use our freedom so that others also may be free, to give others the experience of the awesome love of God.