

If we pause to consider the scene in the first reading about all those animals split in half and the blazing fire that follows, folk today usually have either of two thoughts:

1. All those slaughtered animals are just gory and disgusting OR
2. Slaughtered animals & blazing fire means a big BBQ

Neither of those would be what the authors of Genesis had in mind when they told the story. The ancient world would have been familiar with the ritual of cutting an animal in half – it's what they did when they didn't have lawyers. People would act out a solemn agreement before all their neighbors. They would walk between the animal parts and announce that should they break their agreement may they suffer the same fate as these animals. And should one person break the agreement the other could kill them without worrying about family and friends seeking revenge because this was bargain they made.

So we are talking about a solemn, binding agreement of the most serious kind. But this particular vision would leave them speechless. God himself – in the form of the blazing fire – binds himself to Abraham and his family BUT does not require that Abraham pass through the gauntlet. Knowing how frail human promises can be and the foreseeing the centuries of unfaithfulness yet to come, God does not demand the unfailing promise from the Jewish people but does bind himself to them. That God would take such a risk and make such a promise would be almost incomprehensible to them.

Have you ever had an experience that left you overwhelmed, speechless? Have you ever felt a presence, witnessed an event that mystified you, or just known that there was more going on than our materialistic neighbors want to admit? You aren't alone; you aren't crazy.

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 a 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 to describe.

Eventually they would talk about 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. In OT Moses glowed after seeing God face-to-face, so this too was an external manifestation of Jesus' ecstatic union with his Father. It also says that God's plan of salvation -- the ultimate, lasting, intimate union that he has planned -- 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 today 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.