

From Mountain Flame to Valley Light

Matthew 17:1-9

The \$700 Loaf of Bread

During my recent vacation, I had the experience of eating a “seven-hundred-dollar loaf of bread.” It snowed a lot so our week off started with plowing snow and Juhee and I were tired. So we decided not to go anywhere—just rest at home. And then, because we finally had time, Juhee suddenly said, “I’m going to bake bread,” and she started mixing flour and working the dough.

She let the dough rest, but then she had to run to the hair salon. Before she left, she told me, “In about two hours, flip the dough one more time, and preheat the oven to 200 degrees.” Now... as an obedient husband, I did exactly what I was told. I kneaded that dough like my marriage depended on it. And I started preheating the oven.

About thirty minutes later, Juhee called again and said, “Not 200—make it 400.” So I raised the temperature. And not long after that, I started to smell something burning. I looked—and smoke was coming out of the oven. I thought, “Something is wrong.” So I turned the oven off and opened the door... and inside the oven was a plastic salad spinner. I didn’t know it was in there. I had preheated the oven with that plastic thing inside.

Can you imagine what happened? The plastic had melted, caught fire, and it was burning. In that moment, I panicked. Do I close the door? Do I throw water on it? What do I do? And then I remembered—we had a fire extinguisher we bought a long time ago. I grabbed it, sprayed it, and the fire went out.

But the plastic had melted and stuck to the oven. And the oven was covered with the chemicals from the extinguisher. We didn’t want to use it anymore. So... we had to buy a new oven. Later, Juhee and I laughed and said, “Well, I guess we just ate a seven-hundred-dollar loaf of bread.”

That experience taught me something simple: when a fire breaks out, people panic. I love fire in the right setting. I love a campfire when we go camping. I love a fireplace in the winter. But starting a fire and having a fire are two completely different things. When I can control it, fire feels warm. It feels beautiful. It adds atmosphere. But the moment fire moves beyond my control—even if it’s small—fire becomes frightening. Because then I’m not the one using the fire. I can be the one consumed by it. And that’s why we keep a certain distance. We want fire close enough to enjoy—but not so close that it takes over.

A Light We Admire vs. A Light That Burns

It’s not only fire that works like this. When we stand in front of something overwhelming—like the grandeur of nature—we also keep our distance. We stay behind a guardrail, and we get used to simply admiring it. When I told someone at church that I’m planning to hike the John Muir Trail in July, they said, “Why would you go somewhere that hard and dangerous?” Another person joked, “So are you going to Everest next?” And I said, “No, I’m not that brave.”

Here’s what I mean. When we face something truly magnificent, we often lose our words. We feel awe. And awe means this: I’m standing near something great and powerful—something I can’t control, something I can’t tame. And because we can’t control it, we also sense risk. So what do we do? We step back. We create distance. That’s why we admire the Grand Canyon or Yosemite from behind a guardrail.

Faith can become the same way. We want to stay in control. We try to “consume” faith like a religious product, at a safe distance. “Once a week, I worship. I did my part. I heard a good message. Done.” But today’s Scripture tells us clearly: faith is not meant to stay at a safe distance.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain. And there, Jesus is revealed in glory. So what is the disciples’ first reaction? Peter says, “Let’s build three shelters.” A shelter is a way of making a boundary. It’s a way of controlling space. Instead of letting God’s glory fill the whole mountain—and their whole lives—Peter tries to contain it in one small area. In other words, he tries to turn an overwhelming divine light into a manageable light. He tries to turn a blazing glory into a lamp.

And we do this too. I do this too. Sometimes we don’t treat God as a Light that shakes up our whole life. We treat God like an insurance agent—someone we call only when we need help. Most days, we hold the steering wheel tight. We live our lives our way. And then a crisis comes—an accident, an illness, a problem we can’t solve. Only then do we reach for God. And then we try to make a deal: “God, if you fix this one thing, I’ll study the Bible more. I’ll serve more. I’ll do better.” But that’s not devotion. That’s not faith. That’s just paying a premium to get the outcome we want.

God cannot be contained in the small shelters we build. So what happens next? While Peter is still speaking, a bright cloud overshadows them. The disciples try to contain the holy light—but the holy light surrounds them or consumes them instead. And in that moment, there is only one command: “Listen to him.” True faith begins when we stop—and remain under God’s presence—and listen.

People Consumed by the Flame of Glory

Faith grows in those who truly hear God’s words—and their lives are changed completely. When we consume faith as a religious product, we still hold the steering wheel of life in our own hands. But when the transfigured Lord’s light consumes us, we lose the illusion of control. And the Lord rebuilds our lives from the ground up.

That’s why facing the Lord can feel risky. Because we don’t know how God might change us. So maybe we keep a “safe distance.” We stay moderately devoted. We keep things manageable. We consume faith just enough to feel religious—without letting it take over our whole life. But people who are truly consumed by the flame of God’s glory change. And then, with the holy fire burning within them, they begin to light up the world.

Think about the Samaritan woman at the well. Her life had been a chain of disappointment. Relationships broken. Wounds piled up. And she comes to the well alone. But when she meets the Lord—the source of living water—everything changes. Her life turns around. And she becomes a witness, running back to her town saying, “Come and see. I have met the Christ.”

Or think about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. At the Aldersgate meeting, Wesley experienced his heart being “strangely warmed,” and came to trust the Lord as Savior not just in the mind, but deep in the heart. After that, Wesley could not remain the same person. When many Church of England pulpits were closed to Wesley, Wesley—burning with the Spirit—could not stay inside church walls. He went into the streets of Bristol, into the hidden alleys of London, preaching the gospel. When Wesley was set on fire by God’s holy flame, Wesley no longer waited for people to come into church. He went out into the world, declaring, “The world is my parish.”

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People who have been consumed by holy light must come back down the mountain. Think about how today's passage ends. The cloud lifts. The dazzling glory fades. And Jesus leads the disciples back down into the valley. Why?

Because true transfiguration isn't completed by staying on the mountaintop. It is completed when we carry the holy flame we received on the mountain—and walk into the darkness below to shine. Down in the valley, people are still suffering. The world is still twisted with hatred. And Jesus knows what lies ahead—persecution, betrayal, suffering, and death. Yet Jesus still goes down, carrying the flame of God's glory, and lights a fire that won't go out.

February is Black History Month, so think about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King said he had seen God's vision on the mountaintop. But he did not stay there. He stepped beyond fear, and he went back into the rough, dark streets of Memphis—into the place where sanitation workers were being humiliated and treated as less than human. Because the overwhelming flame from the mountaintop had taken hold of his soul, he was able to become a candle in the valley—willing even to burn himself to give light. And in the face of deep darkness, he declared: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

The “light that drives out darkness” King preached was not an abstract slogan. It was concrete. It means reaching out first—even to someone who hates you. It means resisting injustice, but refusing to resist with violence or hatred—resisting with nonviolence and love. It means being so filled with the light of God's love that you begin to see your neighbor through the eyes of Christ. You hold their pain as your pain. You walk with them. And in your own place, in your own life, you become a small candle that shares light.

Is there anyone here who feels, “My faith has cooled down. It feels like a little ember—almost burned out”? Do you ever think, “In a world like this, what kind of light could someone small like me possibly be?” Don't worry. Our part is to open the window of our heart through prayer. When the window opens, the wind comes in. And when the wind of the Holy Spirit blows into our hearts, even the ember that seems so small begins to burn again—into a holy flame. And that holy fire will burn again—transforming you, and transforming our Asbury UMC.

My beloved Asbury family, Lent begins this week with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season to empty our hearts and clean them out. It is a time to sweep away the layers of ash—ashes of sin that have piled up in us—and to open our hearts to God again. I invite you to make time to come. And I pray this will be a season that helps the holy flame rise again within us.