

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*The Shining Ones*

Luke 9

March 2, 2025

At the transfiguration, which we celebrate today, Jesus appears shining bright light. And with him appear Moses and Elijah—two towering figures from Israel’s past. They appeared with him in glory and spoke with him of his departure, or in Greek, his *exodus* which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Three disciples witnessed all of this and were in awe.

I met someone once whose presence or aura was like the light of a lightning bolt. Years ago, I spent a week at the Taize community in France. The community was begun by Brother Roger in the ruins of WWII in the region of France near the German border where there had been devastating loss and violence. It was to be an ecumenical community that took traditional monastic vows. Reconciliation made concrete day by day, was, for Roger, the purpose of the community. They would offer shelter to anyone who knocked—Jews, communists, members of the resistance, even former German prisoners of war. Three rules, Roger would write for those who would join the Taize community: first, be quickened by the Word of God. Second, maintain inner silence in all things. Third, be filled with the spirit of the beatitudes: joy, simplicity, and mercy. The community grew. It was a light in a time and place that had experienced so much darkness.

In 1958, the Pope made a visit and was moved by what he saw. He called Taize “the little springtime of the church.” He wasn’t the only one to notice. To the quiet and humble small community young people—uninvited--were drawn to camp in the nearby hills and join the brothers for prayer. Soon by the thousands. In a Europe that is hemorrhaging Christians and active congregations, it was and still is springtime at Taize. Even today, up to 60,000 young people each year come to spend a week at a time in prayer, formation classes, and in silence. The musical expression of their prayer—meditative choruses written to be easily sung and prayed—we borrow regularly in our worship. When we do, every time, I hope, too, we share the commitment to reconciliation and to being a light in the darkness.

During my week at Taize, I asked if I could meet the leader of the community, the prior, Brother Alois. Alois had become prior after Brother Roger’s death in 2005. I asked if I could meet him and for a blessing on me, my family, my church, and ministry. I was told yes, certainly. After prayers on Friday night, I was told “Make your way to the back corner of the sanctuary. He will be there and I’ll take you”—said one of the brothers—“to be sure to make introduction and ask him to pray for you.” So I did all of this. Made my way through the dimly lit candelight to the designated corner of the room. There, I was ushered straight to him and found myself face to face with him. Face to shining face. I’m telling you, something in that man burned bright, like a fire burning in him.

The presence of God, of holiness, is described as bright, shining light. Moses' face shone when he came down the mountain after communing with God. In the presence of the disciples, Jesus's face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. St. Paul encourages us by saying glory extends to us who see the glory of God. We, too, are being transformed into the image of God.

God as light is a theme all through scripture. God, who said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God's manifestation in the Old Testament is often a pillar of fire, the same fire Elijah called down from heaven. In the gospels, Jesus is the Light of the World and his disciples are called to bring light to the world. We began this season of the year on Epiphany which celebrates the light of Christ going to all the world. Today, we come to the end of this season with the Transfiguration when we, with the disciples, encounter the light of Christ intimately. At Taize, I caught a glimpse of this on the face of brother Alois.

I reflexively stepped back. It wasn't like meeting celebrity--that's its own phenomenon. It was like being in the presence of The Other, of holiness. I didn't expect that, but maybe I should have. Introductions were made. I said a few encouraging words to him, words of gratitude, and then, I expected him to say, "Let me pray a blessing on you," which is what I had asked for and presumably, what had been communicated to him about my request. Maybe he decided to go a different direction. Maybe he knew somehow deeply what I really needed; maybe he misunderstood the assignment, but he then said, "Would you bless me." Me bless you? You've misunderstood the assignment, I thought. But he bowed his head before me. What do you do when you're a simple central Texas Baptist pastor with the leader of the springtime of the global church slightly bowed in front of you like a child asking for a blessing. Well, you put your left hand on his head, you raise your right hand above him, and you trust the Spirit. I prayed, "Lord God who binds us together, give brother Alois wisdom in his leadership, give him strength and courage. I prayed that he would have the grace to lead and to serve his community in the way of Christ." I prayed all the things for him I wanted him to pray for me. This was over 10 years ago, and I still remember it.

Recently I learned that the prayer I prayed for him—for wisdom and for courage—would be required of him in years to come. Sadly. It came to light that some young people visiting in the 1970s and 1980s had been abused by brothers in the community. Under Alois' leadership, Taize was transparent about these old sins. The only one still living, a now elderly brother who was involved was removed from the community. Taize issued a public statement that this had happened, and they posted a message on their website that anyone who had any allegations from any time could come forward through an email they provided or straight to the authorities, whose contact information they posted.

A few reports came in, each of which had to do with events that also took place decades ago. Until, in 2019, a woman came forward. One of the current brothers had been abusing her for 15 years, "spiritual, psychological, and sexual manipulation and harassment". It was a thunderbolt that shook the community and everyone who loves them. How would Taize respond? Some ecclesial structures faced with the same situation have closed

ranks, tried to hide or diminish abuse by their pastors or priests. Some have blamed the survivors. Others have deflected, seeking better PR.

St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians points a different direction. He writes, "We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God."

In that spirit, Alois, the leader of Taize, took action. He immediately informed competent authorities saying, "We want to get to the bottom of this. Such an allegation is completely incompatible with our lives." The accused brother was immediately removed from the community and turned over to the authorities. He was charged, found guilty, and sentenced. Alois said, "My brothers and I are shocked. We will do everything we can to support the investigation... I stand by the person concerned and we will do everything we can to help them." The community then expanded its protection protocols. There are notices posted on the grounds. Official contacts are clearly posted if someone has an issue to report. The brothers offer discussion groups on the topic, where they discuss what happened and are available to answer questions to the young people who still come and visit today.

The story, while all too familiar, is tragic.

The community's response, as far as I can tell, is exemplary.

All of this was years after I was briefly with Alois in 2014, and saw the light of God on his face. But it bears witness to the enduring truth that holiness isn't just a matter of intense even emotionally charged devotion in prayer with God. It's not just a private matter of personal piety. Holiness is tested, and true holiness is either refined in the crucible of crisis or burned away like dross. Holiness is intimacy with God and devotion to God's people. Their moment of trial is your moment of trial. You rise or fall by how you treat another who is in crisis and how you protect those who are vulnerable. None of us can do everything to meet every need by everyone. There's always discernment and always missed opportunities, but there comes a moment when you are tested. It reveals who you are.

That moment was coming for Jesus on the other side of this mountain. The moment when his holiness would be tested by crisis. Moses and Elijah appear here with Jesus. They are the perfect companions. Moses, the giver of the law. Elijah, the fountain of the prophets. Both saw God in intimate ways like no one else. But the reason they are perfect for this moment may be something else: each came to the moment of crisis to risk everything for someone else. They each stared down power in the name of God: Moses to Pharaoh on behalf of the Hebrews, Elijah to Ahab for Naboth, Jesus to Pilate for all of us.

Moses left behind security and comfort in Pharaoh's house to advocate on behalf of the enslaved and abused Hebrew people in Egypt. He turns against his own luxury and safety and security in his own adopted family's house to identify with and defend the powerless.

This leads to him losing everything of this life and ultimately gaining everything that is of God. Moses would lead the people in exodus from Egypt into the wilderness and to the promised land.

Elijah also confronted the injustice of abused power. He lived in the time of Ahab king of Israel and his wife Jezebel. Elijah's courage had to be rock-solid to speak for and remain faithful to God with those scoundrels in charge. First, it was their twisting of religion as they turned from God to Baal and normalized Baal worship as something good and desirable for all the people. At the moment of confrontation, Baal's prophets danced around begging their feckless deity to act—but nothing. Elijah just prayed a simple prayer of trust and fire came down from heaven.

His greatest act of courage may have been when Ahab and Jezebel had their neighbor Naboth killed so they could take his vineyard. The mighty and powerful always prey on their vulnerable neighbors. Naboth was just minding his business in his vineyard when Ahab first tried to buy it from him, and then Jezebel had him falsely accused and then killed. These two—relentless in their willingness to recreate reality itself for their personal desire and their power. Elijah, the prophet, saw through the farce and condemned them to their faces.

The courage, the conviction, the faithfulness that both Moses and Elijah had in their personal piety and the moment of crisis on behalf of others. At transfiguration, shining with the glory of God:

Moses and Elijah with Jesus as the Lawgiver, the prophet, and the Messiah...

Moses and Elijah with Jesus as two who had seen God and the Son of God...

Moses and Elijah with Jesus as two who had confronted the rulers, and risked everything for those who were suffering, and the one whose life on the other side of this mountain top experience would rise to the same challenge.

Luke says they spoke to him of his *exodus*. Exodus doesn't just mean his departure—or his death though is certainly means that; *exodus* invokes the story of one man giving his life to lead God's people to freedom from captivity. It's a moral story. One Moses lived out; one Elijah echoed; one Jesus would embody.

Today we remember: Jesus was more than a pious man who really, really loved God. He was more than a prayerful man who really, really loved to pray and wanted others to do the same. His holiness, which radiated from him, which was him as the Son of God, took him right into the heart of darkness, and he was willing to go as far as he needed to go, even to the cross.

He was tested. He was tried. He was tempted. This we remember now in the season of Lent. He was tested. He was tried. He was tempted. He never lost focus on God's passionate, sacrificial love for God's little ones, those who are oppressed, those abused by the world's powers, those in need of compassion. All of us. Moses lived this. Elijah lived this. Brother Roger and Brother Alois lived this.

Jesus lived this. And died for this. And now, from the top of this mountain, we go with him down the other side of this mountain into the valley of Lent. It is a valley that asks for personal, interior devotion. But not just this. The personal and interior spiritual work prepares God's people to bear witness and live for him as light in the darkness. Lay down your lives, he says. Take up your cross," he says. That, as St. Paul says, "We may be as those who are being transformed from one degree to another" in this image and on this path in his steps.

May God give us the grace to walk in his light and shine with his glory for all the world. Amen.

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