

March 3, 2019

Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 34: 29-33; Luke 9: 28-43

Prayer: Dear God, We welcome you into this place on the last Sunday of the Epiphany, the day we call Transfiguration Sunday. We seek fresh understanding of your Word. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Next Days

This is a confusing time in the church year. Today is the last day that we celebrate the Epiphany, that period after Christmas when we look at the events that showed us AHA! This Jesus who was born in a stable in Bethlehem was actually God!

Consider the events that Scripture tells us about over a 30-year period:

Magi from the East came to honor Jesus as a child.

He was recognized by the Spirit of God at his baptism.

He changed water into wine at Cana.

He preached in the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaimed himself the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

And today, we look at the high point of his ministry in Galilee – that moment when he climbed a mountain and was transfigured before the eyes of Peter, James and John. We call it Tranfiguration Sunday.

But according to the church calendar, we enjoy this dizzy high point for only three days.

Three days.

For in this very week comes Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, the season of repentance, the season leading to Jesus' crucifixion. It's a season when we sometimes deny ourselves our favorite foods or pleasures as a way of commemorating Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the desert and then his ultimate sacrifice.

Tandy and Elaine Nocks and Nicki Day and Jonathan Jones will lead our Ash Wednesday service this week at noon. It is the day we turn our faces toward Jerusalem and begin to reflect on Jesus's journey toward the cross.

But not today. Not today.

As Scarlett O'Hara said, We'll "think about that tomorrow."

Today is the day that we think, instead, of the extraordinary link between this man Jesus and God.

We're going to turn first to the Old Testament to set the stage. Moses has returned to Mount Sinai to replace the Ten Commandments because he got angry and broke the first set. While he was up there, the Lord "**came down in the cloud and stood there with (Moses)**" and he "**passed in front of Moses.**" (Ex. 34: 5-6)

And then he wrote the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Exodus 34: 29-33**, and let's see what happens next.

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face...."

The people all know when Moses has been talking to the Lord because it shows on his face.

Moses was the Jews' Abraham Lincoln, a mighty leader. Two weeks ago, we talked about the gospel writer Matthew writing his story of Jesus to remind people of Moses.

This week, even Luke is going to adopt that idea. But being Luke, he's not going to be satisfied with leaving Jesus on a mountaintop with Moses. He's going to bring him back down to a level place to meet the rest of us.

Earlier in the ninth chapter of Luke, Jesus told the disciples for the first time that he must suffer and die before being raised to life. And he told them that central tenet of discipleship – that following him might mean the same fate for them.

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9: 23)

It is on the heels of that teaching that today's passage occurs. Please turn in your Bibles to **Luke 9: 28-43**, and we will read together.

28 Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37 ***On the next day***, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at

the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.'

⁴¹Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.'

⁴²While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Clearly, we are supposed to have Moses in mind when we read Luke's story. There are three very obvious clues:

One -- Jesus' face changed its appearance and his clothes became dazzling white – just as happened when Moses met God back in Exodus.

Two -- Moses himself appears on this mountain.

Three -- Moses and Elijah talk to Jesus about his impending "departure." This word "departure" is the same Greek word translated as "exodus" in the Old Testament.

Luke is linking the exodus that led the Israelites out of Egypt with the exodus that Jesus will make on the cross.

The first exodus freed the Israelites. The second exodus will free humanity.

But the epiphany wasn't over. A cloud came and overshadowed them. Peter, James and John were terrified. And then, just as it did at Jesus's baptism, a voice thundered, "**This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"**

The final voice of the epiphany. *Aha, this Jesus is the son of God. This Jesus is God.*

And then the scene ends in silence. Moses and Elijah are gone. And Luke goes back to being Luke.

On the next day, Jesus and Peter, James and John came down from the mountain. And they were met immediately with the woes and concerns, the diseases and the demons of humanity.

A man brought them his demon-possessed son. The disciples who were left behind had already tried to exorcise the demon, but they could not.

Jesus and Peter, James and John return to earth with a jolt. They return to the reality of what it's like to be human, of what it's like to be confronted with the burdens of human existence.

You know, I don't think many of us have a problem with the transfiguration, whether we read it as a metaphor or historical fact. We are ready to believe that Jesus is God, and God can do absolutely anything. That includes making Jesus glow with a heavenly light. That includes bringing back heroes of old to talk to him. That includes a heavenly voice verifying Jesus' divine identity.

No, our problem is making that matter on the next days.

Our problem is making that matter down here on earth, down here where evil spirits seize young boys and convulse them and maul them. Where terrible diseases of the mind cause people to hear voices, see hallucinations, break with reality.

Our problem is making that relevant down here on earth, where addiction turns a brain inside out so that men sleep in freezing buildings with crack pipes for warmth, so that women sell their bodies for a warm night in a motel.

Our problem is making that matter down here on earth, where people of means find the mentally ill and mentally challenged too much trouble to deal with.

We don't live on mountaintops aglow with radiance. We live in the dirt and the filth where people shriek and foam at the mouth and die on crosses ... or on gurneys ... or on asphalt.

And like Jesus, we get tired. Tired of talking, tired of listening, tired of teaching, tired of trying. **"You faithless and perverse generation,"** he said, **"how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?"**

Jesus, the *human* Jesus, was sick of it. One day after radiating the very glory of the Lord, Jesus was speaking snappishly, peevishly. Jesus was losing his temper.

And that, to me, is the true glory of our Lord – that he lived in the dirt and filth where people shrieked and foamed at the mouth and died on crosses. That he, as our NA friends say, got sick and tired of being sick and tired. And that he said rude things like, **"How much longer must I be with you and bear with you?"**

This is a Lord who understands our weariness, our hopelessness. This is a Lord who understands our anxiety, our fear. This is a Lord who understands our confusion, our loneliness, our next days.

For he has lived among us, among the diseased and the injured and the mean and the spiteful. He has known what it means to be human because he was.

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he picked up on these passages. He looked at the transfiguration of Moses and of Jesus and he saw in them a metaphor for life on this side of the cross.

Our side of the cross, where we live constantly in the next day.

Paul likened the veil that Moses used to protect the people from his shining face to a veil that covers the mind of unbelievers. Christ set aside that veil, he says.

II Corinthians 3: 16, 18:

"... When one turns to the Lord," he wrote, "the veil is removed....

¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Imagine that. We are free to live with unveiled faces because we are as transfigured as Moses was. As transfigured as Jesus was.

But neither remained in a state of transfiguration. They came down the mountain on the next day. They came down to join us.

Jesus was God, certainly, and that is what this last Sunday of Epiphany proclaims. But he was human, too, and that is what we look to this week with the coming of Ash Wednesday.

Even at the very moment of his transfiguration, Jesus was talking about his exodus from this life. His very painful, very humiliating exodus.

If you think your life is worthless and hopeless, rest assured that Jesus felt the same way sometimes. For that is what it means to be human. And that is why he can understand our losses and indignities and hurts and failures.

Because there were days of glory and dazzle and transfiguration.

And there were the next days, too.

Amen.