

TRANSFIGURATION 27-02-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12 –4:2

Exodus 34:29-35

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. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterwards all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now 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. Just 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. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When 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.

This is the last week of the Season of Epiphany; Lent begins next week. Today we celebrate Transfiguration: and what on earth is that, you may say. To 'transfigure' something is to transform it into something more beautiful and elevated, according to the dictionary; and in today's gospel we hear about Jesus' appearance being transfigured, as Peter, James and John watched.

For the author of Luke's gospel, the Transfiguration is in many ways the mother of all epiphany stories ("epiphany" means "showing forth"), since it reveals Jesus as a prophet par excellence, and above all, as God's beloved child.

In the verses preceding this passage, Jesus has just spoken what is arguably his most disturbing, difficult teaching of all: that he must suffer, die, and rise again — and that anyone who wishes to follow him must "deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

The Transfiguration's beautiful light, then, acts as a kind of reassurance and encouragement for Peter, John, and James (and for the rest of us!). It's as if Luke is saying: We're now heading towards the crucifixion, and that means descending into the valley of the shadow of death.

But do not be afraid! Keep this astonishing, mysterious mountaintop vision in mind as we go. Carry it like a torch, for it can help show the way, giving us a glimpse of where all this is headed.

By the time of Luke, many Jews believed that Elijah would return to signal the approach of the end of the age. So Elijah was among the most important of the prophets. And Moses was thought to be the author of the Law.

Together, Moses and Elijah personified “the law and the prophets,” the sacred scriptural tradition the risen Jesus will later interpret for the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus often retreated into the mountains alone to pray, but this time he invited Peter, John, and James, as if he had something specific and important in mind.

Jesus’ shining face recalls the old story of Moses’ radiance when he descended from Mount Sinai. In the same way, Jesus’ shining clothes anticipate the heavenly white robes in the empty tomb to come; and the terrifying cloud and divine voice remind us of the depiction of God’s presence in the book of Exodus (24), when Moses met with God.

What happened up there on the mountain?

It can’t be explained except as a vision of a mysterious heavenly realm, and of the world to come. Time and space seem to collapse; the scene somehow becomes incandescent; and Jesus is seen talking with Moses and Elijah.

What they’re talking about is Jesus’ departure: the Greek word our Bible translates as “departure” is *exodos* (or “*exodus*”), a likely reference to Jesus’ coming death, resurrection, and ascension, and a reminder of the original Exodus: when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land. Coming from a cloud, God’s voice repeats the message spoken at Jesus’ baptism. It may be that only Jesus heard the voice in that earlier scene, for there God says, “You are my Son...”; whereas here the announcement is addressed to everyone— “This is my Son...”.

The three disciples are stunned into silence. They don’t yet understand — and who can blame them? For Luke, the true messiah comes not with trumpets and chariots and military triumph, but in the deeply hidden form of a suffering servant, revealed in the resurrection and ascension, the ultimate Epiphany. Until then, this mysterious “preview” — the Transfiguration — remains an enigma for Peter, John, and James. The astonishing vision ends as abruptly as it began: the two older figures suddenly vanish, and the disciples find themselves alone with Jesus.

Finally, just as in the Exodus story where Moses descends from the mountain and teaches the Israelites, Jesus descends from the mountain and continues teaching his struggling disciples.

What is this mysterious story all about? Luke’s central point in the Transfiguration story is this: the coming suffering and death of Jesus may at first appear as an unthinkable, desecrating defeat, but it is a step toward a dramatic, subversive victory.

Jesus will be going into the shadows of death — precisely in order to shine and scatter those shadows once and for all, overcoming them in the end with shimmering light. Jesus will go down into the depths of what can only be called *godforsaken* — in order to lift the world up into renewed intimacy with God, the sort of intimacy familiar to Moses and Elijah; and familiar to Jesus, God’s beloved child.

We can think of this passage as a high “mountain” in the middle of Luke’s Gospel. On one side, we climb up through stories of Jesus’ healing, liberating ministry. And on the other side, we descend down to Jerusalem.

Today we arrive at a clearing on the mountaintop — and from here we can survey both how far we’ve come and the 40-day journey of Lent ahead.

This week, from here where we stand on the mountaintop, we can survey the troubles ahead, take a deep breath, and remember that the journey through ashes and sorrow is never for its own sake. It’s for the sake of what comes next. It’s for the sake of transfiguration: a radiant new life and a dazzling new world of courage, love, and grace.

The Lord be with you.