

Reflection for Sunday, February 27, 2022
Transfiguration Sunday

*Lord,
the eyes of all look to You in hope;
and You give them what they need.
You open Your hand
and satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing.*

*We, too, turn to You again, longing to be filled —
to eat of the Bread of Life,
to drink from Your life-giving streams,
to taste Your goodness and live.*

*May the time we spend together in Your presence
nourish our hearts and minds;
may it strengthen our relationship with You,
and renew our commitment to live in this world as Your faithful disciples.*

*For You alone are God,
the Source and Sustainer of life.*

In Jesus' name, Amen.

This week is the last week of the Season of Epiphany; Lent begins next week. Today is what is known as Transfiguration Sunday, and we have heard the gospel of Luke's account of the event. For Luke, the Transfiguration is in many ways the ultimate of all epiphany stories (remembering that "epiphany" means "showing forth"), since it reveals so much about who Jesus is.

For me, the passage for this week encapsulates some of the major themes in the book of Luke:

- to see/sight/the revelation, "showing forth" of Jesus' identity
- Exodus/liberation
- prayer

I do not know about you, but I have been praying a lot this week. I have prayed for Ukraine and its people. I have prayed for world leaders. I have prayed for the leaders of our country. I prayed that the hearts and eyes of Canadians will be opened. My guess is that many of you have been praying too.

One of the significant details of today's story is that the transfiguration occurs in the context of prayer. Jesus had gone up on the mountain specifically to pray (Luke 9:28).

In the verses preceding this passage, Jesus has just articulated 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). Peter has confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah (Luke 9:20). And now Jesus has invited Peter, John, and James up the mountain to pray. It’s as if the author of Luke is saying: “We’re now making the turn toward Golgotha, and that means descending into the valley of the shadow of death. But fear not! Keep this astonishing, mysterious mountaintop vision in mind as we go. Carry it like torch, for it can help show the way – not least by giving us a glimpse of where all this is headed.”

Mountains are significant places in the bible. They are places where people encounter God. You just have to look at today’s other reading from the book of Exodus the get another example of someone encountering God on the mountain top and being changed by that experience.

I wonder if there are special places you go to pray, to encounter God?

I wonder when you have encounter God, if you were by yourself or if you had companions with you?

Luke frequently centers epiphanies of Jesus’ connection with God in prayer (Luke 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18). Prayer for Jesus, at times, involved a dramatic encounter of God’s presence. It is very often associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that empowers Jesus for healing, for the calling of the Twelve, for enduring temptations, for teaching, and for speaking truth.

Jesus and his three companions go up the mountain to pray. And while they are praying something mysterious happens, in the very moment that Jesus is praying, the appearance of both his face and clothing change.

This story is rich with allusions. (It is a good reminder of why the Old Testament is so important to Jesus’ story). Jesus’ shining face recall the old story of Moses’ radiance that we heard today, when he descended from Mount Sinai. Likewise, Jesus’ shining garments anticipate the heavenly white robe in the empty tomb to come. This is the perspective of the mountain top. You can see the path up the mountain, where you came from, you can also see where you are going. Ascent and descent, past and future collide in this one place.

I do not think this is a story you can logic your way through. I think it requires a certain level of acceptance of Mystery, of being able look beyond rational explanation and still find truth.

Suddenly, Jesus is seen engaging with Israel’s two most prestigious prophets – Moses and Elijah – in collegial conversation. The two are commonly interpreted as embodying “the Law” (Moses) and “The Prophets” (Elijah). Many Jews in Luke’s day considered Elijah to be a figure whose return would signal the imminent end of the ages. Moses, you will remember, was thought to be the author of the Torah (the “law” or “instruction”). Later in the story, we will see the risen Christ assert that Moses and the prophet point toward him (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46) as the ultimate fulfillment of scripture.

What Jesus, Moses and Elijah talk about is quite telling. “They appeared in glory and were speaking of his (Jesus’) exodus, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:31). Two thousand years later, we listeners can intuit what they are referring to – Jesus’ coming death, resurrection, and ascension, and to the ancient idea of a “new exodus” modeled on the deliverance from Egypt, where the Messiah would carry out yet another deliverance, another liberation for God’s people.

Like Moses before him, Jesus is given an experience of God and God’s majesty. Like Moses, in spite of being chosen, he is not granted easy passage. The word exodus is connected with liberation and freedom, but it is also a reminder of plagues, blood, death of first-born sons, and the oppressive power of the Egyptians.

The connections with Exodus remind us that God will deliver God’s people from slavery as often as God must do it. An exodus from under the power of any oppressor has a cost. Jesus must “set his face like a flint” to get to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Jesus’ exodus will deliver even from the power of death, not just death-dealing powers-that-be, but death itself.

Paying attention to world events this week, I cannot help but wonder how God’s liberating power is at work here and now. And wondering what my place in the work might be.

The scene shifts to Peter, John, and James. They were weighed down with sleep but manage to stay awake and witness Jesus’ glory and the two prophets he is conversing with. I feel for these three having witnessed something so amazing, not sure what to think. Peter stammers a suggestion: “Shall we build three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?” Many commenters think this is reference to the Festival of Booths (aka the Festival of the Tabernacle), commemorating the Exodus. We do not what Peter is thinking. Is he trying to corral the overwhelming wonder into something more manageable? Does he just want to commemorate the moment? Or is he simply terrified, grasping for something to say, something to offer?

As Peter makes his offer, a cloud descends, and they enter it. Emanating from the cloud, God’s voice reprises the message at Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:22). The difference this time is that others hear it, instead of “*You* are my Son.,” here the announcement is addressed to all who have ears to hear, “*This* is my Son, listen to him.” Jesus’ identity is confirmed in a spectacular fashion, the three disciples are stunned into silence. They do not yet understand – and who can blame them? For Luke, true messiahship comes not with trumpets and chariots and military might, but rather in the deeply hidden form of a suffering servant.

I wonder how we are listening to Jesus today.

Are we following his teachings, treating both friend and enemy with love?

Are we doing the hard things that our faith requires of us?

The astonishing experience ends as abruptly as it began: Moses and Elijah suddenly vanish, and the disciples find themselves alone with Jesus. I do not think that Luke’s message here is that

Jesus somehow eclipses or supersedes Moses and Elijah, but rather that he stands in profound kinship and continuity with them, both carrying on and culminating their liberating work.

And just as Moses descends from the mountain and works leading and teaching the Israelites, Jesus descends from the mountain and continues teaching his struggling disciples. The very next day, Jesus heals a boy possessed by an unclean spirit (after the disciples have tried and failed). Luke's message is clear – Jesus has come to heal and liberate.

I wonder if you have ever had a mountain top experience with God.

Forgive me if you have heard this story before, but it is my mountain experience and it is formative to my faith and my vocation. It has also become a touchstone memory, that torch to light the way that we talked about earlier, when I am feeling distant from God.

I was in my last semester of university when this opportunity was emailed to me. It was through the church to spend the summer on a farm in Ontario participating in an experiment of community, spirituality, simple living, and social justice. It sounded interesting but I had student loans to pay off and so I deleted the email. A different source sent me the email again, and again I deleted it. Finally, the invitation came by mail, so I got the message and packed my bags.

There were fifteen of us, growing our own food, living in tents, doing daily spiritual practices. During one of the prayer times in the early days of the community was a guided meditation. At the pinnacle of the meditation, we were supposed to ask God a question. I had just graduated from university, a little adrift, thinking about the future...and so I asked that age old question, "what is my purpose?" In reply I felt enveloped in in divine love, like the most intense holy hug. As the meditation ended, I was surrounded by fifteen people I barely knew with tears streaming down my face. It was strange to have such an intimate experience amid other people. I spent the rest of the summer discerning what the experience meant. It sent my life on a totally different track than I had planned for myself.

I wonder if you have had a mountain top experience.

While we should not expect to have experiences like that of Jesus in the transfiguration on a regular basis in prayer, the transfiguration can challenge us to seek something higher in prayer than speaking mere words in the hope that God might possibly somehow listen to us. Prayer can be seeking the powerful presence of God in our lives. We must also remember that dramatic experiences of Christ's glory come with the call to listen and follow.

We can think of this passage as a high mountain in the midst 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 have come and the 40-day Lenten journey ahead.

As Epiphany concludes: Jesus has “shown forth” to be a healer and a liberator; a teacher and a shining prophet. Peter has just called him “the Messiah” (Luke 9:20). But most fundamentally and decisively, he is God’s beloved child. His path of love will lead down into the valley through the dry cinders of Ash Wednesday and the tears of the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow. But 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 is for the sake of what comes next. In a word, it is for the sake of *transfiguration*: a radiant new life and a dazzling new world of courage, love, and grace.

Sources:

<https://www.saltproject.org>

www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word commentary

<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>

Listen to him

Then from the cloud came a voice that said,
“This is my Beloved, my Chosen; listen to him!”
—Luke 9.35

Set aside what you believe. Listen to him.

What is he saying to you,
in this moment?

Let go of what you think:
what do you hear?

Become a calm meadow
and wait for the breeze of God
to whisper.

Wait for a small bird
to settle and sing.

Reading the texts,
saying your prayers,
silence your thoughts.
Shut out the preacher,
listen for a fainter voice,
from so deep within it’s from beyond,
purer than words,
the voice that wants you,
loves you,
creates you.

The voice may surprise you,
contradict or confuse,
but it will shine with light
from beyond all death.
Listen for the voice
that calls you from your tomb
into the light.

The breeze stirs,
the small trees bend.

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