

FIRST LESSON: Exodus 34:29-35
SECOND LESSON: Luke 9:28-36
February 27, 2022

“The Transfiguration”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I have a confession to make. I have a hard time preaching about the transfiguration. If it wasn't in the lectionary I'd probably avoid it altogether. Jesus' teachings, even some of the more challenging parables, are much more straightforward. But the transfiguration is just odd. What exactly was going on here and what was the purpose behind this extraordinary event? It seems like such a strange interlude in the life of Jesus and the disciples. Why did it happen, and why did Jesus take Peter, James and John with him?

The original order of events in the scriptures is not always clear because different gospel authors remember things differently and some of what was written was gleaned from other sources that we no longer have. But Luke, Matthew and Mark all share one thing in common. They all reveal that this event took place after Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to suffer and die. They refused to accept this. They could not get their minds around it. By inviting Peter, James and John to come with him as witnesses, it could be argued that Jesus was letting them know beyond a doubt that God was in charge. What they witnessed certainly made an impression. In the dark days to come they could remember the light.

Jesus' invitation to the three began as a plan to go up the mountain to pray. This seemed to be a natural thing for Jesus to do. But as Jesus was praying the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. I don't know about you, but if I had been there, I would have been terrified. Then two men appeared in glorious splendor, Moses and Elijah. We don't know how the disciples knew they were Moses and Elijah, but they were seen talking with Jesus.

The only frame of reference the disciples would have had for what was taking place was an event in the life of Moses. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two tablets of the covenant his face was radiant. He wasn't aware of this until the people reacted in fear. The reflected glory of God physically changed Moses' appearance, and he put a veil over his face. We have no explanation for this. There is nothing we know of that could cause a human being to radiate light.

Symbolically, Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, but it is possible that the primary reason for this encounter was to give encouragement and support to Jesus. Luke's gospel is the only gospel to reveal what Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah about. Our English text says, "his departure," but the word is much more specific than that. The word is *exodon*, and *exodon* is not found anywhere else in the gospels. This word was chosen

for a reason. They came to speak to Jesus about his exodus, his crucifixion and death.

The exodus from Egypt was the great salvation event of Jewish history. The people of Israel were delivered from slavery through Moses. And like Moses before him, Jesus directly experienced God's glory and power in the transfiguration. But also like Moses, being chosen by God did not mean a clear path and an easy journey. Just the word "exodus" alone evokes memories of plagues, oppression, and struggle. The salvation of Moses' exodus involved forty years of wandering in the desert before entering the promised land. The salvation of Jesus' exodus would not come without struggle on Jesus' part or the part of his followers. Jesus would face the cross. Through Jesus we have forgiveness and are welcomed into the kingdom of God, but along the way we will too will experience time in the wilderness. There is a cost to all salvation. Some of the people in the wilderness complained that they were better off in Egypt. Freedom was too hard. Change and uncertainty was too frightening. Leaving our old way of life behind, even if it was a life enslaved to sin, involves hard choices. People sometimes opt for the familiar because however destructive it is, they know it.

The other connection to Moses is less direct. Moses was instructed to build booths in the wilderness in which the people would live for seven days (Leviticus 23:33-43). This is called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, and is observed today by our orthodox friends and neighbors. Beginning as a harvest festival it came to also represent a remembrance of the Exodus. Peter may have been stumbling around in the dark when he mentioned building three booths, but there was a reason behind his idea.

While Peter was speaking a cloud descended over them and the disciples could not see. A voice then came from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." And then as suddenly as it began, it ended. Everything disappeared, and Peter, James and John found themselves alone with Jesus, stunned. They told no one what happened until Jesus had risen from the dead.

This strange supernatural event occurred "while Jesus was praying." Prayer puts us in direct contact with God. We might not be aware of the supernatural power surrounding us, but it is there. We may not see and feel the power and glory of God but the problem lay with us, not God. We are the ones who moved away from God. Our lives are filled with too much noise, too many worries, and too many preoccupations. Because of our human condition the transfiguration is not likely something any of us are going to experience this side of heaven. Nonetheless God does move in our lives when we seek God. An answer to prayer does not have to come in the form of a dramatic revelation. **It is the same God**, and God meets us at our point of need.

Not one of us can claim to understand the trinity, but the human part of Jesus was able to receive strength and encouragement from human servants of God who had gone before. We don't know what they said. We only know what was discussed—Jesus' exodus from earth. If the conversation hadn't been important, the transfiguration would not have taken place. But the full nature of what Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah about is a closed book to us. We don't

know what they said, or what he said. All we know, all Peter, James and John were capable of taking in at the time, is that it concerned Jesus' exodus. Nor do we don't have any physical frame of reference to account for blinding light and glowing faces. With this story we have entered the realm of the divine and the miraculous. Some day we may understand, but that day is not now.

We can say that through this experience God helped not only Jesus but also the disciples, giving them something that they didn't know they needed. They were about to face devastation. They did not know that, but God did, and so God revealed God's self in power with no ambiguity whatsoever. God gave them something visceral to hang onto in the days that lay ahead, one piece of divine certainty in the midst of a catastrophic storm. And God does this as well in our lives. I have had brief glimpses, often at my time of greatest need, when the presence of God has been so tangible it carried me through. In normal times and ordinary days, this is not the case. I know that God is there, but the divine forms the backdrop of my life, not center stage. But when I have needed it, I have felt God with me in a powerful way. And the thing about these experiences is that even though they are brief in the overall scheme of things, they are potent in the memory. If I know that God has delivered me from evil in the past, then I can **know** that God will be with me in the future. And whenever I question how Jesus could possibly be divine, how he could possibly be more than a very wise human, I remember the times he walked beside me, the times when I felt his presence as real as that of a close friend. I remember the times that I heard his voice in my heart, a voice that does not require ears to be heard, a voice beyond language. I remember all of this and hold on to it in the other times, the times when I feel nothing, hear nothing and see nothing. God does not change, but my awareness of God does. In the transfiguration the divinity and glory of Jesus was there for the disciples to see. And then it was not. But Jesus was still there. Amen.

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the

appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.