

February 27, 2022
“Light Revealed, Light Reflected”
Exodus 34:29-35 / Luke 9:28-43a
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

So today, again, is officially, liturgically speaking, Transfiguration Sunday. We just heard Theresa share Luke’s account of the dramatic story.

Some traditions still have us in the season after the Epiphany, in which case it might be helpful to think of Transfiguration Sunday as a bridge – taking us from Epiphany with the manifestation or revelation of Jesus as God’s beloved, fully DIVINE, to the season of Lent, beginning this week with Ash Wednesday – the season when we are invited to journey with the fully human Jesus through the wilderness and ultimately to the cross.

On Transfiguration Sunday, we spend some time with Jesus up on the mountaintop. The story is told in the three synoptic gospels. The accounts are pretty similar in Matthew and Mark, a little less so with Luke.

Our text this morning begins by asserting that Jesus went up on the mountain to pray eight days after “these sayings.” “These sayings” are referring to his immediately preceding prediction that he must “undergo great suffering” before being raised again, as well as to his description of the nature of discipleship. You know, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

You know, THOSE sayings! Jesus has already, clearly, named the stakes.

Matthew and Mark both say it’s six days later; Luke says it’s eight. No way to know why the difference, or the literary intention behind the specific number, but it’s worth noting that eight does carry significance. Think especially about the seven days of creation described in Genesis, with the eighth day then coming to represent new or renewed creation. That’s why you’ll find many octagonal baptismal fonts, including ours – though currently in pieces in the back of the chapel.

So EIGHT days later, Jesus heads up the mountain to pray, mountains serving as a common biblical location for divine encounter. This is something he did a lot, of course, but usually alone. This time he takes the big three with him, Peter, James and John. We don't know if HE knew what was about to happen and so wanted to them to bear witness, but in any case, they go along.

And it's while he's praying that the miraculous, mysterious transfiguration takes place.

Picture lots of light, divine light. The appearance of his face changed, his clothes dazzled. This is Jesus in his divine glory, his divine fullness. The veil between heaven and earth is very thin, as the ancient Celts might describe the scene. Light revealed, light reflected.

Moses and Elijah appear with him in all their glory, their divine presence, talking with Jesus. Note that in Matthew and Mark, they just talk with him – we're not told about what. In Luke, they're ominously talking about his "departure" in Jerusalem, departure from the original Greek word, "exodos," apparently foretelling the same trajectory Jesus had just described to his disciples eight days earlier.

And recalling, very intentionally of course, the original Exodus –the Israelites led by Moses out of captivity in Egypt and on toward the promised land. The whole Transfiguration story ABSOLUTELY recalls the original, which is why the Lectionary also includes our text from the book of Exodus Theresa read for us.

We get Moses, of course – and you know, Jesus is presented in the gospels, particularly Matthew's gospel, as the "new Moses." We get a dramatic encounter with God on the mountain. We get dazzling, even blinding, light. And we get a shining face.

Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai, where he's just spent ANOTHER 40 days and nights in God's presence, this time coming down with new tablets to mark the covenant, including the Ten Commandments previously revealed to the people.

These are new tablets, right, because, you may recall, when Moses came down the mountain with the originals, he found the people dancing around a golden calf they'd

created to replace God, impatient as they were, waiting in the wilderness for Moses to come back. Moses destroyed those tablets, and the golden calf along with it.

But second time's a charm, and as he came down this time, new tablets in hand, the texts tells us – this is verse 29 now – that “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” He's glowing from his divine encounter, and he doesn't even realize it! That is a beautiful thing.

Light revealed, light reflected.

His brother, Aaron, and the people are afraid to go near him. But Moses gathers them just the same and tells them everything God had told him on the mountain about the covenant. And thereafter, as he continued to go up and down the mountain to receive and then deliver a word from God, receiving and then reflecting the divine light, we're told he wore a veil in their presence – presumably, at least in my understanding, to calm their fear, to ensure their fear didn't keep them from hearing what God had to say through him.

Now as a brief aside, I just want to note that there is a lot of commentary surrounding Moses' veil. Even Paul gets in on it in the Lectionary text from 2nd Corinthians, which we did not include this morning. He interprets it as a veil over the minds of the people of Israel, a veil in his view only, ultimately, lifted by Jesus, the Christ.

It's a text, among many others, that has long been used to justify what's called Christian “supersessionism” and the theological belief that Christianity replaced Judaism, that Christians replaced Jews as God's chosen people, that the so-called “New” Testament replaced the so-called “Old” Testament, that the “new” covenant replaced the “old” covenant, and on and on.

It is divisive and dangerous theology at the heart of historic and often violent antisemitism within Christian tradition, and to be clear, it is nonsense. Jesus, we remember, was Jewish. And Jesus himself said, again and again, that he did not come to replace the law or the covenant, only to fulfill it, to renew it. To renew the spirit of it.

To suggest otherwise, I would argue, is to follow the gospel according to Paul, not Jesus' gospel of love. I'll leave that at that. End of aside.

So with the spirit and legacy of Moses and the Exodus and the divine covenant very much in the background, light revealed, light reflected, we come back to Jesus and his disciples.

The three disciples, exhausted as they are, have taken all this divine glory in, and then Peter does what he does in all three gospel accounts. He suggests building three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. "It's good for us to be here," he says.

Peter wants to stick around with this holy trio, stay up on the mountain for a while. Maybe he likes the view. Maybe he likes the clarity. Maybe he's looking for some down time. Regardless, you can't blame him. If you've ever had a "mountaintop" experience, literally or figuratively, you can relate. You are in no hurry to come down.

But, of course, the story doesn't end on the mountain. It never does with Jesus. It can't. Jesus goes to the mountain all the time to pray, to be alone with God, to reconnect with his divine identity, to recharge his spiritual batteries. But he never stays there.

The already spectacular scene gets even more spectacular, echoing Jesus' baptism, with a cloud, the sure sign of God's presence overshadowing them, and a voice from that cloud saying in dramatic fashion, "This is my Son, my Chosen," or my Beloved, "listen to him!" When Jesus is baptized the voice is for him, directed TO him, affirming for him his divine identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved."

Here the voice is for the disciples to hear, to further affirm for them Jesus' divine identity: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him." Listen to him.

And then the text goes suddenly silent.

Suddenly Jesus is alone. No voice, no cloud. No Moses, no Elijah. No dazzling light. No shining face. Just Jesus and his three disciples. And we're told they all kept silent.

I'd like to think it's Luke's way of reminding us that it is often in the silence that we are able to hear God's still, small voice. "Be still, and know that I am God!" the Psalmist says.

Now the Lectionary kind of gives you the option to stop the reading there. In the silence. Still on the mountain.

But then, of course, you also have the option to keep going. Which is what we did. Because again, that's what Jesus did. That's what Jesus always does.

He never stays on the mountain because, while divine light may often be revealed on the mountain, divine light is ultimately meant to be reflected in the valleys and plains and rough places, in the cities and towns, of the world below. While the mountain may provide the best view of the promised land, as a weary Dr. King suggested in his final "Mountaintop" speech delivered the night before he would be killed to a crowd gathered to support the ongoing sanitation strike in Memphis, it's down below where the promise is realized.

The divine light of Jesus' transfiguration is reflected as the story continues, the very next day when Jesus comes back down the mountain with his disciples to find a crowd waiting. What else is new, right?! And so here, again, we can appreciate Peter's desire to stay up top for a while.

Jesus, God's beloved Son, is approached by a father to look at HIS beloved son, his only son. Seized by a demonic spirit, causing violent convulsions and rabid foaming at the mouth. He tells Jesus that he'd already asked his disciples to cast the demon out, "but they could not."

"You faithless and perverse generation," Jesus says in response, presumably addressing his disciples and/or the larger crowd, "how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" OUCH!

Harsh as his words may come across, I take them as a variation of Jesus' repeated emphasis on the power of faith in the divine promise of light reflected on earth as it is in heaven. The faith, overcoming our fear, that we, as fellow recipients and bearers of

divine light and would-be followers of Jesus and his way of love, are fully capable of reflecting divine light ourselves – far more capable than we routinely think we are.

As Marianne Williamson has said, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. . . . You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Light revealed, light reflected.

His point made, Jesus responds to this particular need himself. He asks the father to bring his son, who is now actively convulsing, and Jesus rebukes the spirit and heals him.

Light revealed in glory. Light reflected, in this case, in the form of healing and liberation and new life.

As those listening to Jesus, fully divine, fully human, following in his footsteps, that is OUR work to do. The work that calls us again to the Lenten journey with Jesus, through the wilderness. To the cross. The work that begins with faith and ends with love.

We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. To believe, beyond fear, in the divine promise of goodness and abundance for ourselves and each other. To go up the mountain when we need to, to reengage our divine connection, to reclaim our identities as God's beloved, but always, always, ALWAYS to come back down as reflections, however dim, of God's light in the darkness. To let your light, God's own light within you, shine in the wilderness.

To paraphrase St. Francis, reflecting faith where there is doubt. Hope where there is despair. Peace where there is war and conflict and violence. Joy where there is sorrow. Love where there is fear and hatred.

That is how WE change. That is how THE WORLD changes. That is how the world is transformed. That is how the world is transfigured. Light revealed. Light reflected.

I leave you with this “Transfiguration” blessing from Jan Richardson:

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.
We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.
But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.
It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.
It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray
until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,

when it will shine forth
with all that it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.

May it be so.