

TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD SUNDAY

by Rev. Emily Chapman

February 14, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



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Lectionary Texts:

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses 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. ³²Afterward 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; ³⁴but 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, ³⁵the 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 9:28-43

²⁸Now 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.

³⁷On 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 convulses him 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. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples,

I’ve always loved the mountains...or most any high place. There is just something about seeing the world from up above. Everything looks peaceful, beautiful, even picturesque from on high. And I have always felt close to God in the mountains. Reading the Bible, we find that mountains are a common place for God coming very close to us, for dramatic encounters. I wonder if the disciples knew what they were in for when they headed up the mountain with Jesus. You’d think, knowing what they know about God, they might realize something major was about to happen. But then again, perceptiveness is not so high on the disciples’ list of virtues. Plus, they were tired. I can imagine they sort of trudged up the mountain, exhausted from a day of feeding thousands of people, of healings, preaching, teaching, trying to understand and follow Jesus, plus all the traveling around on foot, in the heat. They have fairly chaotic lives, full of demands, full of people clamoring for attention. And now, just when they might get to rest, Jesus calls them up the mountain to pray. I cannot help but think that had I been one of these disciples, I might have asked Jesus if we could just pray right where we were. But the point is, they go — maybe

they were also ready to get away from all, so that last trudge up the mountain is worth a moment's peace and quiet.

So they steal away up the mountain. When they get there, our scripture tells us that Peter, James, and John, the same disciples Jesus asks to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, are already “weighed down with sleep.” But for now, they manage to stay awake. It's a good thing — their sleepiness almost prevents them from witnessing the glory of the Lord. Jesus is transfigured before them. It's sort of hard to imagine what this would look like — it's a good thing that here we are concerned not with historicity, we are concerned with epiphany, which is not confined to time or place. At the transfiguration time and place are rendered insignificant as Jesus' face changes and his clothes become dazzling white. And then, two other figures show up. Moses, who we read this morning was also transfigured following a mountaintop experience of meeting God, and Elijah, the prophet whose reappearance was to signal that the Messiah was due.

Jesus has come, and like Moses, will set God's people free, not from the chains of Egypt, but from the stronger chains sin and fear. This bondage is far more crippling than metal shackles. But here stand Moses the giver of law, Elijah the prophet, and Jesus the Messiah, all appearing in glory, such great glory that the three disciples could only see that dazzling light for a moment — but what a moment it was. So stunning and incredible that Peter asks, “can't we just stay here? We'll build a place for you all to live and we'll just dwell in this glory instead of going back down the mountain to all that mess.”

Who can blame him? We have those moments in life. Those moments that steal your breath and stun you to silence, those moments marked with no words, only a lump in the throat, or a tear in the eye, or a fluttering heartbeat. We all have moments in life we would like to live in forever. Moments where we see the glory of God with us in a flash of light. We know how Peter feels when he just wants to stay there forever.

But no sooner has he asked the question than a cloud covers them, and a voice speaks from the cloud into the darkness that had just been pierced by blinding light.

But once in the dark, they find Jesus alone and go back down the mountain and back to work without mentioning, just yet, what they had seen there. After all, no sooner had they come down than there are more crowds waiting for him, begging for his healing touch and his steadfast presence in the face of their faithlessness.

Peter, James, and John have to come down the mountain and back to grind. Though clearly, one can still see the greatness of God in the valley – after all, the scripture says that all were astounded by seeing God’s greatness in Jesus. But nothing quite meets that moment of glory on the mountain that spoke both in light and in darkness.

We think of light and darkness as opposites. One is good, one is bad. God’s glory is revealed in both.

That is the crucial lesson for the disciples and for us this final Sunday before Lent. As they come down the mountain, Jesus has already turning his gaze toward Jerusalem. We all are preparing ourselves for the journey to the cross, to another mountain but a very different kind. Our Haitian brothers and sisters have a proverb that goes “beyond the mountains there are mountains.” That is surely the case here. One mountain leads to another, though it may be a different sort of glory revealed on the next one. We are moving from the mountain of Transfiguration to the Mount of Olives to the mount of Golgatha. The disciples will have to rethink what glory is when they see that face once transfigured in glory, twisted in pain at Golgatha. They will have to rethink what glory really is when those dazzling white clothes are shredded to be given as trophies to the taunting mobs. As we make a shift away from Galilee and toward Jerusalem in these coming weeks, we’ll have to hold on to this glimpse of glory, as we are left to wonder why God hid this moment of glory high on the mountain. After all, so many were there to see the crucifixion. Jesus’ face did not shine. No one appeared to sweep him up off the cross and whisk him safely to heaven.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that it is because then it would be a different sort of death than the rest of us die. And that just would not work. To be able to lead us like Moses did, into God’s freedom, he had to die the way most of us

do, basically alone, with no particular glory beaming from us. Any other way and he would have “been an anomaly instead of messiah” and there would be no way for us to see what he had in common with the rest of us.

So it is another kind of glory that we are moving toward in the coming weeks as we trudge toward another mountain, one we would rather not venture up. It is a painful but necessary reminder that Christ’s life among us includes not just moments of flashing bright light, but darkness and death. But the promise is that God’s glory is present in both, light and darkness – and sometimes Jesus does his best stuff in dazzling darkness, not light. So even as we gather later this week to smear ashes on our faces and prepare for a season of repentance and lament, we are sustained by this last display of glory. In the transfiguration, light burst all the way through Jesus, showing up what he was made of – and he didn’t forget it. As we move into the season of Lent, we need a little dose of glory to get us through...and thank God, Jesus has shown up again, this time transfigured as bread and wine. When we taste it, we remember what we’re made of – so that we don’t forget it when we come back down the mountain, or down from the altar table. As we begin to look with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the journey to the cross, we are sustained by the presence of our Lord who has not yet tired of showing up among us, revealing his glory in moments of stunning light and dazzling darkness.