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Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 6:29-43a

March 2, 2025 – Transfiguration

***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 6:29-43a***

***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 as bright as a flash of lightning. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke 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 set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” not realizing what he was saying. 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.***

***37******On 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 put up with you? Bring your son here.” 42While he was being brought forward, 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.***

We began the season of Epiphany with three men following a bright star, and a voice from heaven proclaiming Jesus the Son of God at Jesus’ baptism. Today, the final Sunday of Epiphany, we feature dazzling bright people and a voice from heaven once again, declaring Jesus as God’s Son, with an added admonition to listen to him. The season of Epiphany begins and ends, with brightness, glory, and the presence of God.

The season of Epiphany is all about what is being revealed as we learned about Jesus call, his baptism, his divinity and his early ministry. We have gotten a taste of the world that Jesus is up against even from the start. As stories about him begin to spread, those looking for hope from the long expected Messiah flock to wherever Jesus is. And as those same stories spread, those who feel the looming threat of Jesus’ authority, miracles, his message and his followers, followed their fear and began to run Jesus out of the temple and out of town. In recent weeks our texts from the gospel of Luke have asked us to think a little deeper. We considered how we might participate in our own miracle stories; we considered what it means to be blessed; we were reminded that our dependence and trust should not be in mere mortals, but in God; and last week we were challenged even more to do the hard thing and love our enemies. All of Epiphany is like a Cliff Notes version of the early life of Jesus and the coming impact being a follower of Jesus will have on our perspectives, decisions and behaviors.

Today we are transitioning to Lent which begins on Wednesday. With a little overview of Jesus’ early start and ministry in our minds, we enter Lent ready to go deeper into Jesus’ final journey to the cross. How do we prepare ourselves to take this journey?

The lectionary, the assigned choice of scripture from week to week, gives us a transition day in between each church season. Today, Transfiguration Sunday is the traditional transition from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. Transfiguration refers to the description of Moses in our Old Testament reading, and Jesus in our New Testament reading, after having been in the presence of God. Their appearance was transfigured.

In an earlier chapter of the book of Exodus, before our text for today, Moses had gone up the mountain and come down with stone tablets with the ten commandments. But upon seeing the golden calf that the Israelites had built and were worshiping, Moses threw the tablets on the ground and broke them in a fit of anger and dealt harshly with the Israelites. Our text for today is Moses second time up the mountain, returning with a replacement set of stone tablets. Moses didn’t even know that his face was different, was shining. This time the Israelites were afraid to come near Moses because they took him a little more seriously now. Moses though recognized his role as mediator and called the Israelites to him and talked to them. By seeing Moses’ face shining, the Israelites were witnesses to a small view of the divinity that Moses experienced. Moses was transfigured by his experience in God’s presence, so much so that others then looked at him differently.

Our text from the gospel of Luke tells of Jesus transfiguration. In the gospel stories we are able to understand this as a transitional text, moving from Epiphany (Jesus’ early ministry) to Lent (Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross). “In [all of] the Gospels, the story always appears after Jesus’ first passion prediction, as the focus of ministry shifts toward Jerusalem.”3 It’s that shift – after Jesus first predicts that he will suffer and die – that makes us turn our faces toward the Lenten journey to Jerusalem. “Just as Jesus’ baptism precedes and empowers the first phrase of earthly ministry, his transfiguration precedes and empowers the second half.”3

The most difficult and maybe impossible task on this Transfiguration Sunday, is trying to explain what’s going on. So instead of explaining it, I’m going to invite us to experience it through the text. I’m going to read the Luke text again, promising not to become glowing white myself, and I invite you to close your eyes if you’re comfortable and listen. Put yourself somewhere in the scene. Listen for something new. Maybe you’re one of the disciples. Maybe you’re Jesus – hey, no one is checking! Maybe you are a stranger, looking on from a few yards away. How do you feel? Maybe there’s a breeze. Maybe it’s a little cold. One commentator reminded me that in Luke, prayer sets the stage for every major event, every decision and major ministry moment. So let’s read this, noting that it is prayer that starts the narrative.

***Now 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 as bright as a flash of lightning. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking about [Jesus’] exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw [Jesus’] glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as [the men] were leaving [Jesus], Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” not realizing what he was saying. 34While [Peter} 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.***

Does anyone want to share their reaction or thoughts?

What a rich text. Full of a sense of place, a sense of joy and bewilderment and confusion, terror as the cloud came upon them with a loud voice, and then – nothing. Jesus was alone. Moses, Elijah, the brightness, the cloud and the voice – gone.

If our scripture for today ended there, we might take home the message that our experiences of the divine are supposed to be like this, and we could imagine how perfect life would be after such an indescribable time.

How does the remaining text change our ideas about transformational exotic strange unearthly divine experiences? Well, it kind of takes the wind out of our sails! Let’s listen.

***On the next day, when [Jesus and the disciples] had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met [Jesus]. 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 put up with you? Bring your son here.” 42While [the boy] was being brought forward, the demon dashed[the boy] to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43***

So much for that great and glorious time on the mountain top! The disciples couldn’t cast out the demon and heal the boy. It’s like the first job after med school and you forget everything you learned. Or a recital that flops, after just having a perfect rehearsal. I worked in the parts department of a trucking company once – yes, go ahead and try to picture that – it’s as strange as it seems. There really wasn’t any training. I worked a swing shift and people would come in after the rest of the company was closed, with some – thing – and say “Do you have one of these?” One time when I was new, I was trying to get the price of something someone was going to buy and my boss just got frustrated and said, “Here let me show you.” But he didn’t show me, he just did it. I could just hear him maybe saying, “How long is it going to take for you to learn this! I won’t always be here when you’re working!” That’s Jesus. “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and put up with you?” Here, bring me your son, I’ll just take care of it.

Without this second portion of the scripture from Luke for today, we would feel all the glory and none of the reality. The reality is, any experience of the presence of God must be amazing and confusing and awesome, *but isn’t where things stop*. If the transfiguration were only about the shiny parts and not the down and dirty real world, it wouldn’t have any value.

I want to share with you a lengthy quote from a commentator I read this week writes, He writes, “The Transfiguration experience clarifies Jesus’ significance and reaffirms his purpose—*but does nothing to alter the challenges to come*. This puts into perspective the relative significance of spiritual mountaintop experiences in our lives today: While offering clarity, affirmation, and formative experiences, the call to ministry leads us *not to stay there* (as Peter may have desired), *but to return below*, where the hard work of healing happens. After all, Jesus’ ministry is not transformative and redemptive because of what he did *on the mountain*, but what he did *in the valleys and wilderness areas elsewhere.* Like many spiritual mountaintop experiences, it offers a glimpse of the divine that *alters perspective more than circumstances.”3*

Our world needs us right now. Whenever there has been a major shift in life events, world forces, people ask themselves, “What is my role?” “Who am I in a position to help?” “Will I be safe?” The pandemic did this for us collectively. When someone we love, or even ourself, is sick, we ask how we can help. What’s next for me, for that person? When a family goes through a life-changing event, there is discernment required. What do we do now? What does my future look like?

People of faith will look to prayer. Will we be transfigured? Will we be different after the prayer, so that others also see us differently? More confident, walking a little taller, an air of clarity in our step. If we remember to bring our mountain top experience back down to our earthly life and make it relevant, then more than just ourselves will truly be transformed.

Let’s pray,

1<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-02-24/exodus-3429-35-4/>

Jenista, Meg, March 2025

2 <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-02-24/luke-928-36-4/>

Harmon, Chelsey, March 2025

3<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-928-36-37-43a>

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