

Sunday, March 3, 2019
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)
Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 34.29-35; 2 Corinthians 3.12—4.2; Luke 9.28-36
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In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” I would have to disagree. There is a third thing that is certain in this world. Change.

While many people may not care for change, it’s pretty certain that it happens regardless. Just look at the changes that we undergo as we go through our lives. After we are born, we are completely dependent on others for our care. As we mature, we are able to begin taking care of some of our own basic needs. As we get a little older, we begin school. We graduate from high school. Some of us go on to college. After graduation (from whatever level of education), we enter the workforce in our chosen field. At some point in this process, most people leave their parents’ home and move into their own home. Eventually, many get married. They have their first child—maybe eventually having more children. Our children grow up, go to school, and eventually leave home. In due time, we retire. And throughout this series of changes, some people experience even more changes—moves to different homes, changes in jobs or even careers, health issues, etc. Each of these milestones brings with it changes in mental and physical ability, changes in our appearance as we age, changes in our way of life, and even changes in our sense of identity. Such changes are inevitable.

Our Scripture readings for today are all stories that, in one way or another, involve change. Change in appearance. Change in relationship. Change in identity.

In the Old Testament reading from Exodus, we hear of the aftermath of Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai, when God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses. He comes down from the mountain changed by his encounter. The most obvious change that is recorded is “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (Ex 34.29). As we hear, the people were freaked out by seeing Moses’ face all aglow. They were afraid to come near him because there was a common belief at the time that one could not look upon God and live. While this was not the case with Moses—he had obviously seen God and lived to tell the tale—they were still frightened by the sight and feared that they somehow might be subject to death just by looking upon the glow of Moses’ face. A glow that was due to being in God’s presence. So, to ease the minds of his people, Moses wears a veil when with them so they cannot see and therefore be harmed by—or fear being harmed by—the effects of his Divine encounter.

While not so obvious from what we heard, this story of Moses’ encounter with God also implies other changes that Moses undergoes by virtue of that encounter. His relationship with God has changed. This is signified by the fact that God has allowed Moses to see him face-to-face and live to tell about it. And related to this change in relationship is the change in Moses’ identity. A subtle change is that he is now the undisputed “go between” between God and his people. Moses already had this identity for being the prophet who communicated God’s desires to the people. But now this identity is undisputed. And Moses has the glowing face to prove it.

But even more so, Moses, in delivering the Ten Commandments to the people, takes on the identity of Lawgiver. He is the one who delivers to the Israelites not just the Ten Commandments, but all 613 of the laws that will be the foundation for the life of the people. The laws that will define the social and religious activities of the people from that day forward.

It is not just Moses whose identity is changed in his encounter with God. The laws that God gives to Moses—that Moses delivers to the people—will shape the very identity of the Israelites themselves. These laws will define their actions and responsibilities as God’s Chosen People. These laws will define who they are as Jews. Laws that continue to define the Jewish people to this very day.

Then there’s our Gospel reading from Luke, where we hear of Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, going up a mountain to pray. “And while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Lk 9.29). Jesus is transfigured, radiating that same glory of God that caused Moses’ face to shine after his encounter with God. We are then told that Moses and Elijah appear to talk with Jesus, particularly about what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem—referring to his death and resurrection. After some bumbling and essentially inconsequential actions on the part of the Apostles present, “Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” (Lk 9.35).

Jesus’ transfiguration is most certainly a change in appearance, albeit temporary. It is an outward and visible sign of the transformation that was taking place in that moment. But more importantly is the transformation regarding Jesus’ identity. Not that his identity is truly transformed—it has always been there. Rather, on that mountain, the true nature of Jesus’ identity is at last revealed to his closest followers. Up to this point, the disciples still don’t fully understand who Jesus is. Not even Peter, who eight days before uttered his famous declaration that Jesus is “the Messiah of God” (Lk 9.20b).

The extent of this revelation of his true identity is also indicated by the presence of Moses and Elijah, representing the two foundations of the Jewish tradition, the Law and the Prophets. Moses representing the Law, given on Mount Sinai. And Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, chosen to represent the tradition of God interacting with his people through the prophets. The presence of Moses and Elijah serving as a visual clue that Jesus, in his transfigured state, which itself foreshadows his resurrection, is indeed the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. That through his resurrection, he will transcend the Law and the Prophets, ushering in a new era for God’s people. Religion based on the Law and the Prophets is replaced by religion based on relationship with Christ. That instead of the Law and the Prophets being the means of relationship with God, the resurrected Christ will be the means of our relationship with God.

And then, of course, God puts the period on this transformation in Jesus’ identity by saying to Peter, James, and John, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” A verbal affirmation of the identity indicated by the visual clues of transfiguration and the presence of Moses and Elijah.

Peter wants to stay up on the mountain top, basking in the glory of God that is revealed in the transfigured Jesus. But, eventually, he and the other disciples will have to come down from the

mountain and be with the people. Keeping this experience to themselves will do no one any good. They will be required to act upon what they saw and heard on that mountain. As with Moses giving the Law to the people, thereby transforming their identity, Jesus' transfiguration and all that it represents also serves to change the identity of those witnessing these events. The three disciples, who needed this experience to help them comprehend the following events—namely Jesus' resurrection—and to comprehend through that event that Jesus was indeed the chosen one of God. And through their testimony following Jesus' death and resurrection, they would serve as the conduit for the transformation in those who follow Jesus. That they are to witness to the fact that through Jesus, there is a transformation of relationship with God, now made possible not through the Law and the Prophets but through our own face-to-face encounter with God's Chosen.

It was not just Jesus who was transformed on that mountain, but we ourselves were also transformed. Just as Jesus' transfiguration prefigures his resurrection, through his death and resurrection we are ultimately transformed. Through his death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven and death is defeated, and we are brought into new and eternal life through and with Christ. And we are transformed by the indwelling Spirit—the Spirit of Christ—that is given to guide us in living into this new, transformed life. But it is not just transformation in the ultimate, eternal sense. We are also transformed in the short-term—that time before we ourselves die and are born to eternal life. We are called to live into that transformed life even now. Reflecting to the world the glory of God that radiates from Jesus' transfigured face. As Paul writes to the Corinthians in today's Epistle reading, "All of us . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 2.18).

Today's readings depict the brilliance of the presence of God in the world. The brilliance of the presence of God that causes Moses' face to glow as an outward sign of his encounter with God. Jesus is transfigured, his presence a dazzling brilliance, revealing the brilliance of the presence of God in the flesh—Emmanuel, God with us. And through his death and resurrection, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that brilliance of God's presence is imparted to us. Transforming us in our lives here and now, and in our lives in the world to come.

So, I leave you with a few questions to ponder as we prepare for our Lenten journey—the journey we will take with Jesus, down Mount Tabor, on to Jerusalem to his Passion, culminating with his ultimate transfiguration at the Resurrection:

How is our appearance transformed—obviously not a physical transformation, but a spiritual transformation—by our encounter with the living God?

How is that spiritual radiance that we possess, because of our own encounter with God, manifest?

And do we choose to veil it, as did Moses, or do we choose to allow that presence to shine forth in our lives?

Blessings on your journey down the mountain.