

Sunday, August 6, 2017
Feast of the Transfiguration
Luke 9.28-36
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Today we journey with Peter, James, and John, as they accompany Jesus up a mountain. Where they – where we – experience something extraordinary. The Transfiguration of Jesus. The Transfiguration is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels – in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These accounts leave little doubt about who Jesus is. Whereas Matthew and Mark put periods on the subject, Luke, the version we heard today, puts an exclamation point. Luke’s version, while conveying the same events as in Matthew and Mark, provides even more detail that further emphasize who Jesus is for the disciples. And for us.

This mountaintop experience is placed in the context of prayer. The other Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration merely note that Jesus and the three disciples went up the mountain. But Luke specifically tells us they went up to pray. And it was while Jesus was praying that he was transfigured. Luke often has Jesus going away by himself to pray. But here, he takes Peter, James, and John. Why? Because this whole experience is not for Jesus’ benefit. It’s for theirs. They need this.

In the past week, their whole understanding of Jesus has changed. First, eight days before, Jesus asked the disciples “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (Lk 9.18). There were varying responses, from John the Baptist to Elijah to one of the ancient prophets. Jesus pressed further: “But who do you say that I am?” To which Peter confessed, “The Messiah of God” (Lk 9.20). And as if that is not enough, Jesus went on to foretell his death and resurrection. From there, he proceeded to teach them about the true cost of discipleship in light of all this.

The experience on the mountain is intended to confirm the revelations of the previous week. Jesus recognizes that the three disciples accompanying him – the three who will become the leaders of his movement after he is gone – need confirmation of what they have been told. Particularly if they are to take up the banner of leading the rest of Jesus’ followers into true discipleship.

This confirmation is, of course, accomplished through Jesus’ transfiguration, where we are told “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Lk 9.29). But that’s only part of it. Jesus’ transfiguration in and of itself only provides an incomplete, or at least, an ambiguous means of confirmation. That’s where Moses and Elijah come in.

The other Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration merely note that Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus. However, Luke tells us that they appeared in glory. Moses and Elijah each had their own mountain experiences, during which they came in direct contact with God. During which their roles as spokesmen for God, as preeminent prophets, were sealed. Whereby their status as icons for the law and the prophets is secured. Because of their positions, according to tradition, the reappearance of these two prophets would be a sign of the coming of the Messianic age.

While the presence of Moses and Elijah symbolize the law and the prophets, having them appearing in glory underscores the Messiahship of Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets in a dramatic way. Moses and Elijah in glory and Jesus in dazzling glory visually emphasizes the point that is only implied (albeit strongly) in other Gospel accounts. Each being preeminent prophets, coming together in dazzling array, meeting with Jesus in dazzling array sends a clear message that Jesus is more important, more significant, than these two combined. The only person who could possibly be more important would be the Messiah himself. For only the Messiah could possibly fulfill both the law and the prophets. For the three disciples, this provides needed confirmation of Jesus' Messiahship.

Then there is the other hot topic of the previous week. Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection. Moses and Elijah are key to this as well. While the other accounts of the Transfiguration note that Jesus talked with the two prophets, only Luke includes details of the conversation. Luke tells us they "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk 9.31). Even though we do not have the specific words spoken, we know in hindsight that this is clearly discussion about his death. And about what would follow – his resurrection. This too is emphasized visually in the glorified appearance of Jesus. Foreshadowing the glorification of the resurrected Christ.

And there is one more means of confirmation of Jesus' Messiahship and his impending resurrection. Verbal confirmation from God. The other Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration note that God says "This is my Son, the Beloved." Instead of "Beloved," Luke reports that God said, "This is my Son, my Chosen." Maybe it's splitting hairs, but "Chosen" seems to imply a greater degree of certainty that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of God. Even more so than simply terming him Beloved. After all, we are all beloved of God. These words echo those spoken to Jesus at his Baptism (Lk. 3:22); however, this time they are also heard by the Apostles. Jesus is the One chosen and beloved by God. The Beloved of God chosen specifically for this role as Messiah. A role which would only be completed through his death and resurrection.

In these experiences, Peter, James, and John have received irrefutable confirmation of all that had been revealed to them by Jesus mere days before. There was confirmation that he is indeed the Messiah, as Peter had confessed. There was confirmation of his impending Passion. In a very human attempt to process all of this, Peter tries to hold on to the experience. He tries to make the experience last by offering to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. He wants to build certainty, to contain the mystery. But that is not what this is about. This is about providing the confirmation that is needed not so the disciples can stay on the mountaintop and bask in the glory of their Messiah. Rather, God gives them their marching orders. "This is my Son, my Chose; listen to him!" "Listen to him!" And Jesus has already told them, in his previous discussion about true discipleship, that they are to carry his message into the world. They are to live his message in the world.

At this point, they still don't quite understand the meaning of true discipleship. What they did not realize was that upon returning down the mountain, they will be called to share in those events foreshadowed and confirmed in their extraordinary experience. They will be called to witness and share in Jesus' Passion. They will have to bear the pain not only of losing their

Master. There will also be the pain of Peter's denial, of their running away and hiding. And coming through Jesus' Passion, despite the way they will handle it, they will share in the glory of Jesus' resurrection, as well.

We are told that upon coming down the mountain Peter, James, and John "kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen" (Lk 9.36b). Part of this was surely out of obedience. In their exchanges prior to going up the mountain, in response to Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus had told them not to tell anyone (Lk 9.21). But frankly, what could they really say about their experience on the mountain? They didn't have the words to describe what happened. It was so fantastical, so otherworldly. And even if they did try to describe it, no one would have believed them. No one would have been able to understand. THEY didn't even really understand. At least not in the moment. Not until Jesus' resurrection and ascension would any of this even begin to make sense. And even then . . .

As we see in our Epistle reading from the Second Letter of Peter, near his death Peter is still reflecting on what he experienced on that mountaintop some 35 years before. How that experience guided him in his ministry. Of how that experience helped him to listen to what Jesus was truly saying about discipleship and informed how he lived the Gospel. Of how he laid the foundation for those of us who come after.

Every time we come to this place, we journey up the mountain with Jesus, as his beloved disciples, for a time with him in prayer. In our weekly time of worship, we hear the words of God that we are to listen to his Son. Perhaps not those exact words, but that is the ever-present message in what we do hear. In the words of Scripture. In the words of our prayers. In our music. In our greetings of Peace to one another. In our times of worship, we, like Peter, James, and John, encounter Jesus transfigured. Perhaps not with physical eyes, but through spiritual eyes. As we see the images of Christ's life and ministry in our windows. As we see the empty cross, the symbol of resurrection. As we see each other as members of the Body of Christ. As we make Eucharist, where we see bread become the body of Christ that we hold in our very hands. As we see the wine become the blood of Christ. As we ourselves are transfigured by partaking in the body and blood of Christ.

And like Peter, James, and John, when our experience in this place is completed, when we have received confirmation of who Jesus is for us, we go down the mountain, as well. Only we are not bound by the same command to not tell anyone. Rather, we live under a new command. That we ARE to tell anyone and everyone. As Mark writes in his Gospel, before his ascension Jesus commanded the disciples to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16.15). We are to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Like Peter, James, and John, our Lord leads us down the mountain, into the valley, to share with him in his Passion, his suffering, and his death. And strengthened by our experience of his Transfiguration, by the confirmation that he is our Messiah, the one we are called to listen to and to follow, we ourselves are transfigured, for we ourselves share in his resurrection.