

Sunday, February 27, 2022
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Exodus 34.29-35; Luke 9.28-36

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/628753648221055>

(Sermon begins at about 17:50)

“Transfigured”

Today we are at a transition point. Both in terms of the liturgical calendar, as well as in the stories of both the Hebrews’ forty-year journey in the wilderness and Jesus’ own journey through his life and ministry. As to the liturgical calendar, this is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany—where we wrap up our Epiphanytide focus on the many ways that Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, as the Messiah, and we begin to turn our attention to the season of Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday. The readings appointed for this day, particularly the Old Testament reading from Exodus and the Gospel reading from Luke both have themes that relate to this shift in focus from Epiphany to Lent. Stories that help us make the transition from the time of revelation we experienced over the last two months to the time of living into what that revelation means to us in our own lives of faith.

Or, to put it another way, I often use the language of journey to describe what we experience in the various liturgical seasons, as each have their own focus and each are intended to guide us in our own lives of faith, in our own faith journeys. This day is an intersection where we make the turn from Epiphany to Lent. The stories we hear this day have elements of journey for the principal characters involved. And each contain images that apply to our own journeys, particularly our Lenten journey that begins this coming week.

Since the central reading for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany is always the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, we will start there. It is important to note that what we hear today occurs just eight days after Jesus makes the first of three statements foretelling his death and resurrection. As we hear in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, James, and John. While there, he is transfigured: “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Lk 9.29). Then, Moses and Elijah appear and have a conversation with Jesus, “speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk 9.31). God then proclaims, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Lk 9.35).

This scene is rich with imagery. The appearance of Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets in Jewish history. Moses representing the Law and Elijah representing the Prophets. Them coming to Jesus signifying his role in fulfilling the law and the prophets, as he proclaimed at the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5.17), and which, following his resurrection, Jesus interprets for Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. The discussion between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus centers on Jesus’ departure—a reference to his impending death, resurrection, and ascension. The transfiguration itself, with Jesus’ appearance changing and his clothes becoming dazzling white foreshadowing his resurrection and his entering into glory. And certainly, God’s proclamation serves as confirmation for Peter, James, and John that Jesus is indeed the

Messiah. Bringing together and helping frame the images and the events on that mountain as revelation, as a foreshadowing, of what is to come—of Jesus' destiny.

The Transfiguration is viewed as a key turning point in Jesus' life and ministry. An intersection in his journey. Where his focus shifts from being about his ministry of teaching and healing to his journey toward Jerusalem—to his Passion and death. This is often referred to as the point where Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." A term that is used by Luke soon after Jesus comes down from the Mount of the Transfiguration (Lk 9.51).

This was obviously a critical, pivotal point for Jesus and his ministry. But what about for those who were with him on that mountain? We don't often talk about that. We don't know for sure, but Peter seems to have been changed, transfigured, by the experience on the Mount of the Transfiguration. We are never specifically told. But he certainly recognizes that something significant is going on. So much so that he offers to "make three dwellings, one for [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Lk 9.33). Perhaps a gesture of hospitality, to provide places of comfort for the three principal figures as they engaged in whatever conversations they needed to have. Or perhaps as a way of holding on to this most sacred moment—the meeting of their friend and leader with the two greatest prophets of all time. Witnessing what he did on that mountain would have had to have been a life-changing event for Peter. Of course, what happened there was so fantastical, so otherworldly, so unbelievable, that he, along with James and John, probably didn't fully understand. As we are told, "they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen" (Lk 9.36b). Perhaps because they weren't quite sure themselves. But certainly because no one would understand or even believe what they were being told. It would not have all come together, it would not have made any sense, until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Only then would Peter and his companions have been able to look back and realize, "oh, that's what the Transfiguration was all about. Pointing the way to this moment." So, yes. If Peter, James, and John were not changed in the moment, they certainly would have been changed down the road when all the pieces finally fell into place.

Another story of transfiguration, of someone being changed by encounters with the Divine, is contained in our Old Testament reading from Exodus. God, working through Moses, has led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Now that they are safely out and making their way through the wilderness headed toward the Promised Land, God, with the help of Moses, has begun the long, hard work of forming the Hebrews into the people God has called them to be. It is during this forty-year journey that much of the formal structures of their Jewish faith will be established. Much of that formation has to do with God giving a set of laws to his people and beginning to build the structures that will shape, guide, and support their religious and social systems on their journey and in their new homeland.

To do this, Moses needs to spend a lot of time with God, receiving the law and the other information needed for this task of forming the people into who God wants them to be. To prepare them for the journey ahead—not just to the Promised Land, but beyond as they eventually become a nation that will, as God has promised, be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12.2). God has established his base of operations on Mount Sinai. The Hebrews are camped at the base of the mountain. And Moses must continually go up the mountain to confer with God and then go back down to convey to the people the knowledge that God has imparted.

Just by way of a little back story, you may recall that Moses had received the tablets with the Ten Commandments—which, by the way, was only a small part of what God conveyed to Moses. When he came down from Mount Sinai with them and discovered the people worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses, in a fit of anger, broke the tablets. In today's reading, Moses comes back from Mount Sinai again, having received the second set of tablets, replacing the originals he broke.

We are told that Moses is visibly changed by his encounter with God – “the skin of his face was shining, and [the people] were afraid to come near him” (Ex 34.30). This was obviously an unnatural glow that is only attributable to being in the presence of God. In the ancient Near East, divine figures were often thought of as having luminous faces. The people were probably freaked out about Moses' shining face because they thought that he had somehow become a god himself. To ease their fear of being in the presence of a potential god, Moses covered his face with a veil when he was in their presence. Or at least when he was not delivering a message from God. Presumably, the purpose for not having his face veiled while delivering messages from God was to let the people know that what was being proclaimed was indeed from God. The implication is that this was something more than a temporary occurrence. Although we are never told any more about the phenomenon—whether it was something that continued with Moses for the rest of the journey in the wilderness or for the rest of his life. Or whether, over time, the glowing diminished. Regardless, Moses' encounters with God obviously had an effect on him. Certainly, in terms of his physical appearance. And while never revealed, such encounters would have had to have affected him mentally, emotionally, and certainly spiritually. Undoubtedly shaping and guiding his actions throughout the rest of his journey in the wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land.

As we wrap up the season after Epiphany and prepare for our Lenten journey, we are guided, even accompanied in a sense, by those who have gone before. Those who have made their journeys of faith, strengthened and guided by their experiences of, their encounters with, the Divine. Moses on Mount Sinai, and then throughout his journey in the wilderness to the Promised Land. Peter, James, and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration, and continuing as they journeyed with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. In both cases, not just physical journeys, but also journeys of faith. Journeys that were given meaning precisely because of their respective encounters with the Divine.

We have our own encounters with the Divine. The story of Moses, the story of Peter, James, and John, provide us with a guide as to how we are to approach our own encounters with the Divine. Their stories also provide us with an invitation. To consider how are we changed, how are we transfigured, by our encounters with the Divine. And perhaps more importantly, how do we hang on to that and carry it with us as we prepare for our Lenten journey? As we descend the mountain and begin our own journey toward Jerusalem.