

Sunday, August 6, 2023
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Exodus 34.29-35; 2 Peter 1.13-21; Luke 9.28-36

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Service Live Streamed at:

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(Sermon begins at about 19:50)

“Confirmation by Transfiguration”

The Transfiguration is one of those pivotal moments in the life of Jesus and his disciples. It is so important that we hear this Gospel lesson, or the comparable version from Matthew or Mark, every year on the last Sunday after the Epiphany—on the Sunday before the start of Lent. But in addition to that placement in our lectionary, there is also an entire day devoted to commemoration of the Transfiguration: August 6th. In the Episcopal Church, our liturgical calendar has a hierarchy of feast days and holy days, and designations as to which take priority over others. Of course, there are what are known as “Principle Feasts:” the seven major holy days that take precedence over all other days, such as Easter Day and Christmas Day. Next in the hierarchy are regular Sundays, with each Sunday considered a feast of our Lord commemorating the Resurrection. Each Sunday has its own set of readings, referred to as “propers.” Referring to the “proper” readings and prayers designated for each Sunday of the three-year lectionary cycle. But the Transfiguration is so important that it is one of only three commemorations that take priority over the regular Sunday propers. And because of the way the calendar falls, August 6th only occurs on a Sunday once every six years. This year being one of those years. As such, we interrupt our regularly scheduled lectionary readings to focus on the Transfiguration.

To more fully appreciate what the Transfiguration means, we need to step back about a week. Eight days before Jesus went up the mountain with his chief lieutenants, Peter, James, and John, he had a pivotal conversation with the Twelve. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” To which they respond “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” Jesus then asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” To which Peter answers, “The Messiah of God” (Lk 9.18-20). What we now recognize as Peter’s confession of faith. The first recorded confession of belief in Jesus as the Messiah, as the Son of God. And then, on top of that radical confession, Jesus proceeds to foretell his death and resurrection: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9.22).

For a whole week, the Twelve are left to sit with this startling, earth-shattering news. We don’t know what happened in the succeeding eight days. There is no record of it. But the disciples are all undoubtedly experiencing a range of emotions. Shock, for sure. Probably confusion at the disconnect; that the one who is the Messiah, the Son of God, would actually—could actually—be put to death. Also confusion and uncertainty about what he meant by being raised on the third day. Sadness at the impending loss they would experience. Fear about what would happen to them after his death. And likely some anger at the thought that such a thing needs to

occur. This is the backdrop against which today's trip to the top of the Mount of the Transfiguration occurs.

The event of the Transfiguration itself is documented on one short verse: "while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." That's it. That's the Transfiguration. Everything else that is recorded merely provides additional information as to what this strange event of the appearance of Jesus' face changing and his clothes becoming dazzling white actually means. Let's take a look at these points in order.

We are told that after Jesus is transfigured, "Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him." The appearance of Moses and Elijah is significant. These were considered two of the greatest prophets in the history of Judaism. Moses being the one who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, through the wilderness, to the Promised Land. And, during that wilderness experience, went up Mount Sinai where he received the Law from God—the Ten Commandments, along with hundreds of other laws to guide the people in their lives of faith. And Elijah being considered among the greatest of the prophets in the history of the people. A prophet that was so favored by God that he did not die. Instead, when his service to God was complete, he was lifted into heaven.

As such, Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the Prophets. The presence of these two together provides a powerful image of who Jesus is. The Hebrew Bible, what we refer to as the Old Testament, was sometimes referred to by the term "the Law and the Prophets." Moses and Elijah, collectively representing the Law and the Prophets, appearing with Jesus, is meant to be a sign that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. That Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the associated covenant between God and his people.

The presence of Moses also provides an indication of how Jesus is the fulfillment of that covenant. Jesus is, like Moses, one who will lead his people—who leads us—into a new way of life. The one who leads us to the Promised Land. Only this time, not Israel, but the Promised Land that is God's Eternal Kingdom. The fulfillment of God's Kingdom, again represented by Jesus transfigured in glory.

How this will happen is indicated in the interaction between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. As we are told: "They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." This impending departure to be accomplished at Jerusalem is a direct reference to the revelation he made eight days prior, when he foretold to the Twelve his impending death and resurrection. In fact, the Transfiguration is considered that pivotal point when the trajectory of Jesus' life changes, figuratively and literally. When his purpose shifts to focus on the endgame. Represented by the literal change in direction when he begins his final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The place where he will fulfill his ultimate purpose through his death and resurrection. His resurrection now being represented in more than the words conveyed to his disciples eight days before. Now, his resurrection, being visually represented through the Transfiguration. Represented in his appearance changing, in his clothes becoming dazzling white.

All of this providing visual confirmation to Peter, James, and John that what Jesus had foretold eight days before would indeed happen. Even if they did not fully understand in the moment. And one final confirmation is provided by God himself, when, as we are told, “a cloud came and overshadowed them . . . Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” This being irrefutable confirmation of what Peter had confessed: that Jesus is the Messiah; that Jesus is the Son of God.

The entire experience on the Mount of the Transfiguration certainly seems to be choreographed for the benefit of Peter, James, and John. Those who would be called upon to lead the Jesus Movement post-crucifixion and post-resurrection. Those who would lead and guide the movement into what it would become: the Christian faith. Something that Peter obviously took to heart and which was foundational to his understanding of what it means for all who are followers of Christ. In our Epistle reading today from the Second Letter of Peter, he writes about the events of the Transfiguration as providing confirmation of who Jesus was and who we are as his followers. As Peter notes, “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.” Recognizing the centrality that the Risen Lord will and does play in the lives of those who follow him.

Even our Old Testament reading, recording an event that occurred some fourteen or fifteen hundred years before the Transfiguration, has something to say about the meaning of transfiguration in the lives of the faithful. This transfiguration involves Moses, who, in his glory, would participate in the events surrounding Jesus’ Transfiguration. We are told that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” As the passage unfolds, we find that whenever Moses had an encounter with God, his face would continue to glow afterwards. Moses was himself transfigured, as it were, by these interactions. Implying that, in some deeper way, Moses himself was changed, was transfigured, by his encounters with God.

The Apostle Paul himself references the fact that Moses’ face glowed when dealing with God and needed to veil his face because of the people’s fear. That in their fear, they were not able to truly know God. Not the way Moses did. Paul then equates the veil with that which prevents people from knowing the light of Christ. He further equates the new covenant that was instituted through Christ’s death and resurrection with the lifting of the veil. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed . . . And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3.16, 18).

Paul takes this image of the transfiguration that Moses experienced in his encounters with God and makes it an image for our own encounters with God. How Christ’s death and resurrection, first foreshadowed and confirmed in Jesus’ Transfiguration, provided a fundamental shift in humanity’s relationship with God. A relationship in which we, too, are transfigured. As a result, our own lives shine with the glory of God, providing confirmation of who we are and whose we are, as those transfigured by the Transfigured One.