

Sunday, March 2, 2025
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)
Exodus 34.29-35; 2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2; Luke 9.28-36

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1304053800710559>

(Sermon begins at about 23:25)

“Do Our Faces Shine?”

Throughout Epiphanytide—our celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany and the season that follows—we have explored the many and varied ways in which Jesus is revealed as Messiah for all people. In the process, also seeking to discern what this means for those of us who seek to follow him. Catching glimpses here and there of his glory, of God’s glory, shining in our own lives. Today we come to the end of our annual Epiphanytide journey by traveling with Jesus and his closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—up the Mount of the Transfiguration. A journey in which we witness the ultimate expression thus far of who Jesus is as Messiah. A climactic event bringing together all aspects of what it means for Jesus to be Messiah for all people. An event eclipsed only by what it foreshadows, by what we will witness at the end of the next season we are preparing to enter.

As this journey up that mountain begins, there is no indication of anything special. Today’s journey up the mountain appears to be just an ordinary day-in-the-life for Jesus. He often went away by himself, often to a mountaintop, to pray. To recharge and reconnect with God. But this was different. He took Peter, James, and John with him. His chief lieutenants. Jesus obviously has something important in mind. They are to be witnesses—and in the fullness of time, to bear witness—to the ultimate revelation of who he is. The symbolism of what unfolds on the Mount of the Transfiguration is so rich, bringing together so much of who Jesus is, so much of what his life is about, so much of what he will continue to accomplish beyond his earthly life. Each detail revealing more.

Jesus begins, as is his custom, by spending time in prayer. “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Aside from being startling to say the least, this phenomenon would have reminded Peter, James, and John of another scene on a mountaintop. One that was central to their lives of faith. The scene we heard as our Old Testament reading today: of Moses being on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. “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.” When the people saw Moses’ face shining, they freaked out, being “afraid to come near him.” Not just because it was unnatural and out of the ordinary. More importantly, because at that time in the ancient Near East, a glowing face was thought to be a sign of divinity. The Israelites were afraid because they thought that while in God’s presence on Mount Sinai, Moses had become a god himself. And at that time, it was thought that one could not look upon a god and live. So, they were fearful for their lives.

Jesus' face changing and his clothes becoming dazzling would have certainly been interpreted by Peter, James, and John as a sign of divinity. Of course, being in Jesus' presence as his disciples, they already knew of his divinity. Just eight days before, Peter had confessed that he believed Jesus to be the Messiah of God. While not necessarily a divine position, one that could be interpreted as such. And now, here on this mountain, they had visible confirmation.

As if divinely choreographed, after the scene calling to mind Moses' face glowing, who appears but Moses himself. One of the greatest of the prophets. The giver of the Law and the author of the Torah. As if one great prophet was not enough, Moses brings a companion with him. Elijah, another of the great prophets of their tradition. Considered among the most prestigious of the prophets.

The presence of these two great prophets itself being so filled with imagery of who Jesus is and what he would accomplish. Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, together being the personification of "the law and the prophets"—a term used to indicate the totality of sacred scripture. In coming to Jesus, demonstrating that Jesus stands in partnership and in solidarity with Moses and Elijah; carrying on and fulfilling their work. In coming to Jesus, symbolizing that he, in one person, is the embodiment of the law and the prophets. That he is the fulfillment of sacred scripture.

This is particularly indicated in the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, who "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." The Greek word we translate as "departure" is *exodos*, meaning "exodus." Discussing the "exodus" Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem. Reference to his impending death and resurrection. Events Jesus had foretold to his disciples eight days before.

Images of exodus further emphasized by the presence of Moses. The one who led the people on their exodus out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and to new life in the Promised Land. Further emphasized by the presence of Elijah. The prophet who did not die, but who was taken up into heaven by God himself. The prophet whose return was thought to signal the imminent end of the ages. Together, symbolizing what Jesus would himself accomplish through his own exodus, leading his people on their exodus out of enslavement to sin and death to a new and eternal life with him. An exodus that he would prepare through his own death and resurrection. The resurrected One who, in the fullness of time, would herald the end of the ages. The age of new and eternal life for all God's beloveds.

Throughout the experience, Moses and Elijah appearing in glory, in all their holiness. Jesus, transfigured, with "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes becoming dazzling white." This being a visual depiction of his resurrection. Perhaps time and space somehow collapsing momentarily and actually revealing to Peter, James, and John a glimpse of the resurrected Christ.

Through the benefit of time, ourselves living this side of the resurrection, we can see how what happened on the Mount of the Transfiguration symbolizes and foreshadows what happened with Jesus' Passion and what we understand to be promised for the end of the ages. But for Peter, James, and John, they were left trying to sort it all out. In the midst of their fear and

confusion, to try to make sense of what they have witnessed. Figuring out how this fits with what they know of Jesus. Of who they know Jesus to be. In their stumbling to try to sort it all out, they seek to hold onto the moment. “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But that is not to be. Strange though it was, they have witnessed what they need to. Events that would only make sense after they themselves have witnessed the Risen Christ.

As if to help move them along, God has the final word. “Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” At his baptism, God spoke to Jesus alone: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3.22). But here, God speaks directly to Peter, James, and John. Providing them with the ultimate confirmation of who Jesus is. God’s Son. His Chosen. Their Savior.

As quickly as it began, it was over. “When 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.” They had received a great gift that no others would receive. The experience of witnessing Jesus’ transfiguration. Experiencing the ultimate expression of who Jesus is as Messiah, as Son of God. Experiencing confirmation directly from God. Confirmation that, admittedly, would not have made complete sense in the moment, but which would only make sense, in due course, following the events that they would witness in Jerusalem.

This side of the resurrection, we are able to make sense of all that was revealed on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Okay, maybe not complete sense, but at least understand, through the eyes of faith, what Peter, James, and John witnessed. To have a clearer sense of what it means to us as people of faith.

But there is one thing I wonder. Did their faces shine? We hear in our Old Testament reading how Moses’ face shined after being in God’s presence. Peter, James, and John had been in God’s presence. Doubly so. They had been in the presence of Jesus, God’s Son, transfigured, revealing his glory as the Resurrected One. They had been in God’s presence as he proclaimed to them, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” So, did their faces also shine? Revealing that they had also been in God’s presence? Revealing that they were witnesses to God’s glory made manifest?

And what about us? Do our faces shine? We have just completed through our journey through Epiphanytide, in which we have explored the varied ways Jesus is revealed as the Messiah, the Son of God, God in the Flesh. As people of faith, we are on a journey in which we are continually invited into God’s presence. A journey, a way of being, which the Apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians characterizes as: “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.” Likening this glory that transforms us as being the same glory Moses experienced, necessitating him to “put a veil over his face.” That being the case, do our faces shine?

In our own day, this glory that transforms us may not be readily manifested as shining faces. And yet, as people of faith, the glory of being in God’s presence does transform our lives

nonetheless. While not necessarily visible through shining faces, the transformation is visible through how we live our lives, through our words and actions, through our very being. This week we are ending one season, one in which we explored how Christ is manifest in our lives as the Messiah, as the Risen One. And we are preparing to enter a new season, the season of Lent, in which we intentionally focus on how we live our faith. How we seek to more intentionally demonstrate our faith through how we choose to live our day-to-day lives. Providing us with ongoing opportunities to come into God's presence where we are transformed by his love and grace. A transformation that shows forth in tangible ways. Maybe even with our faces shining a little more brightly.