

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 21, 2010
Transfiguration Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99:5-9
2 Peter 1:13-21
Luke 9:28-36

This story from today's Gospel lesson of Jesus' transfiguration is very difficult to preach. Here's why: most stories or texts of Scripture are such that we can draw analogies to our own experience, we can explore how our lives parallel the lives of the persons in our texts.

But I don't care what type of mountain top experience you may claim to have had, it isn't like this one! New Testament scholar Fred Craddock describes it for us this way: "This is a mountain top experience, but not the kind about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music, and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence." [Fred Craddock: *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and*

Preaching, Luke. Ed. Paul J. Achtemeier. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 135.] There are no parallels between us and the people about whom we read today.

So what I'm going to do today is this: I'm *not* going to try to show how our experience can be like that of Jesus or the disciples. What we shall do is explore more fully from Luke what happened on that mountain, and then draw a very important conclusion that applies to our lives.

What happened on the mountain?

Well, let's start by placing this mysterious event in its context. The text begins by saying, "about eight days later." The question is: Eight days after what?

If you work backwards from this event, you'll see that Luke joins Matthew and Mark in placing this event immediately after Jesus' first prediction of his suffering and death. He has just told the disciples that he is about to set his face toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and be killed as part of God's plan. So for eight days, then, Jesus and his disciples have had time to ponder this announcement.

And as Moses and Elijah join Jesus on the mountain, the topic of their discussion is how Jesus is about to fulfill God's plan by *dying* in Jerusalem. So this whole event on the mountain must be seen within the framework of Jesus' *suffering and death*.

But there is another contextual detail. Luke tells us (v. 28) that the transfiguration occurs while Jesus is "at prayer." Prayer plays a key role in Luke's Gospel, but Luke is doing something very important here.

Do you recall Jesus' baptism? Luke tells us that "while Jesus was praying," the heavens opened, a dove descended, and a voice said, "this is my beloved Son, listen to him!"

And here on the mountain, it is while Jesus is praying that he is transfigured. And near the end of the experience, what happens? A voice comes from the cloud and says, “This is my Son, my Chosen one. Listen to him!”

Luke is tying together Jesus’ baptism and his transfiguration. They parallel one another in an important sense. For after submitting to baptism prior to beginning his ministry, Jesus received heaven’s confirmation of his call as the Son of God.

And now, after speaking with his disciples about his passion before he turns toward Jerusalem, Jesus once again receives heaven’s confirmation. This time, though, three disciples are present to hear the voice from heaven. And this voice says that the talk of death which they’ve been hearing does not contradict Jesus’ Messiahship (as they might think). The One who has announced to them that he must suffer and die is indeed God’s Son, and he is to be obeyed.

So, the context for this glorious event is Jesus’ suffering and death, and the divine voice from heaven confirms both Jesus’ calling *and* the way by which he is to fulfill it.

Now let’s look at the event itself.

Luke tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain to pray. It’s very possible that this event took place at night, because we are told that the disciples are fast asleep. You can hear echoes of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed

and the disciples fell asleep. (The context there was also Jesus' impending suffering and death!)

At any rate, as Jesus prays, he is transfigured. His appearance changes and his clothing becomes a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear, and they have a conversation.

Now Matthew and Mark don't tell us what this conversation entails. Only Luke does that. They discuss how Jesus is about to fulfill God's plan by suffering and dying in Jerusalem (v. 31).

At this point Luke engages in some masterful theology. The term he uses to describe Jesus' death is the term "exodus." In doing this, Luke links the ministry of Jesus to that of Moses, who is now on the mountain with him.

Just as Moses led the children of Israel on their exodus from slavery in Egypt, so Jesus in his death and resurrection will create a new people by leading them from slavery to sin into new life in the Spirit. Jesus' obedience continues and completes what God has done in the past (through Moses and the prophets) and points to what God will do in the future, in the resurrection and transfiguration of all things.

At this point the sleeping disciples wake up. And who wouldn't?

And as they're trying to make sense of it all, a cloud covers them and they are gripped with terror. That's because in the Old Testament the cloud was associated with the awesome presence of God.

Remember when Moses went up Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24? It reads:

Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. And the glorious presence of the LORD rested upon Mt. Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from the cloud. And the Israelites at the foot of the mountain saw an awesome sight. The awesome glory of the LORD on the mountain top looked like a devouring fire. [Ex. 24:15-17]

And from the cloud, the voice says, "this is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him."

And then the disciples are left there alone with Jesus. They are silent, which is the appropriate response. They are not prepared to speak of this experience, and who is ready to hear about it? The following episodes will make clear that they are far from understanding. And of course, you and I would like to penetrate the mystery of this experience, but we cannot.

Let me just try to tie this all together, and then offer you a conclusion that you can apply to your life.

For Jesus, this experience confirmed who he was and assured that the path before him was not only according to the law and the prophets, it was the will of God *for him*.

For the disciples, this experience told them that Jesus was indeed God's Son, who was to be obeyed as he instructed them on the way to Jerusalem and his violent death, even though that did not fit their expectation of what the Messiah was to do. Jesus was to be heard and obeyed, not over against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what had been preserved in the Scriptures.

And what about us? Where does this experience leave us?

Let me offer you this truth, and the challenge that comes with it this morning:

Jesus is the eternal, divine Son of God, who is worthy of your complete loyalty and obedience -- no matter where that may lead you in your life.

As we come to his table this morning, let us do so with both *thankful* and *thoughtful* hearts. Let us give thanks for Jesus' willingness to go where the Father led him, even to Jerusalem and a Cross. And let us think deeply again about the course and direction of our own lives.

And may the words of our collect today be true for us: may we be strengthened to bear our cross and be made like him as we take up our lenten journey together.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

