

Sunday next before Lent Luke 9:28-36

All three synoptic gospels tell the story of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:3-13; Luke 9:28-36)—frequently a sign of the importance of an event from Jesus' life for the early Christian community.

The transfiguration is a highly symbolic story. Jesus took his inner circle of apostles—Peter, James, and John—up a mountain, which in the Bible is a place of revelation so it was clear something important was about to happen.

These three apostles then saw Jesus as part of another important trio, completed with Moses and Elijah, symbols of Israelite tradition. As if that weren't spectacular enough, the voice of God itself made an appearance, uttering two thundering phrases: "This is my Son" and "Listen to him."

Unfortunately, none of the apostles' reactions showed that they understood what had just happened. First of all, they were half-asleep when the whole thing started—not the last time that would happen at a key moment. They were also terrified to the point of talking nonsense about building shelters for the holy figures. Then on the way down they started an off-topic debate about the resurrection and Elijah.

What the apostles didn't grasp right away was the significance of the fact that Moses and Elijah were "talking with" Jesus. This sacred conversation identified Jesus with the law and the prophets. It showed how Jesus had the same authority as these two pillars of Israel's tradition and how that authority came from the same God. To leave no doubt, God's voice drove home the point with words heard at an earlier affirmation of Jesus' status, his baptism: "This is my son, the beloved" (Matt. 3:17).

What the apostles also didn't get at first was that they couldn't stay on the mountain. One can sympathize with their desire for such a wondrous break from the difficult path of discipleship. Down the mountain and back to that task, however, they had to go.

The Gospel of Luke adds a delicious detail: Moses and Elijah had been speaking with Jesus "of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem." His exodus? That loaded word points back to the arduous journey of following Jesus, and that's what the transfiguration is about. It's wonderful to find inspiration in a shining vision of Jesus, but the message to the church then and now is that witnessing glory is one thing, following is another. After the vision is over, you look up and see, as the apostles did, "Jesus only," and you realize

that, to get to the further glory of eternal life, you have to follow him to the cross.

In the same way that Candlemas was the pivotal day as we switched our gaze from Christmas and Epiphany to Lent, so the Transfiguration of Jesus marks the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and pointing ahead to his passion. This is emphasized in Luke's version where Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus of his exodus- his departure. The Greek word exodos – his departure can also mean death-departure from life but it also looks back to the escape from Egypt, suggesting that the death of Jesus will bring freedom to many as the Exodus of Moses had done before.

After the Transfiguration, Jesus is heading only in one direction, towards Jerusalem where the main events would occur. We are told that the disciples were drowsy during the actual Transfiguration but they saw its after effects and experienced the cloud that overshadowed the event.

The fact that Peter's suggestion occurs when Moses and Elijah are preparing to depart reveals a desire to prolong the experience of glory. This means Peter is focusing on the wrong thing.

The experience of the Transfiguration is meant to point forward to the sufferings Jesus is about to experience. It is meant to strengthen the disciples' faith, revealing to them in a powerful way the divine hand that is at work in the events Jesus will undergo. This is why Moses and Elijah have been speaking "about his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem."

Peter misses the point and wants to stay on the mountain, contrary to the message the two heavenly visitors have been expounding.

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[c] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said.³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen,^[d] listen to him!"³⁶ 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.

Good old Peter! Full of good ideas and enthusiasm but sometimes entirely missing the point- just like us!

I'm allowed to pivot from Peter's foolish gesture to the (supposedly sophisticated) observation that discipleship isn't about adoring glory or mountaintop experiences; no, it's about going back down the mountain, into

the grit and the grind of everyday life, where we can feed the hungry and cloth the naked and do everything else upper middle-class Christians aren't embarrassed to affirm.

Or, rather than pivot to the poor, I can keep the sermon focused on Peter. I can encourage you to identify with Peter, the disciple whose mouth is always quicker than his mind and whose ambition never measures up to his courage. I could preach Peter to you and comfort you that Peter's just like you: a foolish, imperfect follower who fails at his faith as often as he gets it right. And, yet, Jesus loves him (and you) and builds his church on him.

It is all about going back down the mountain, back into 'real life.' Or, look at Peter—he's just like you.

If this is nothing more than another example of how obtuse Peter is, how Peter always manages to get it wrong, then when Peter professes, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah," why doesn't Jesus correct him? Why doesn't Jesus rebuff Peter and say: 'No, it is good for us to go back down the mountain to serve the least, the lost, and the lonely?'

Why doesn't Jesus scold Peter? "Peter, it's not about spiritual experiences, the Son of Man came to serve."

If Peter's offer is such a grave temptation, then why doesn't Jesus exhort him like he does elsewhere and say: 'Get behind me, Satan?'

If Peter is so wrong, then why doesn't Jesus respond by rebuking Peter?

In fact, here on the mountaintop, is the only instance in any of the Gospels where Jesus doesn't respond at all to something someone has said to him.

Ludwig Feuerbach, a 19th century critic of religion, accused Christians that all our theology is really only anthropology. Rather than talking about God, as we claim, we are in fact only speaking about ourselves in a loud voice.

Just think what would Peter make of the fact that so many preachers like me make Peter the subject of our preaching? Which is but a way making ourselves the focus of this story.

Don't forget that this is the same Peter who insisted that he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus and so asked to be crucified upside down.

In this image of the transfigured Christ Peter sees the life of all lives flash before his eyes. In one instant of transfigured clarity, Peter sees the humanity

of Jesus suffused with the eternal glory of God, and in that instant Peter glimpses the mystery of our faith, that God became human so that humanity might become like God.

This is where the good news is to be found.

Not in a message like 'serve the poor' that you would still agree to even if you knew not Christ.

No, the good news is found in the same glory that transfigured the face of Moses and dwelt in the Temple and rested upon the ark and overshadowed Mary pervading even Jesus' humanity and also, one day, ours.

The light that radiates from Jesus' flesh is the same light that said 'Let there be...' It's the same light that the world awaits with groaning and labour pains and sighs too deep for words. It's the light that will one day make all of creation a burning bush, afire with God's glory but not consumed by it.

It's not about going back down the mountain. Rather the entire Christian life is a steep climb, venturing further and further up the mountain, to worship and adore the transfigured Christ and, in so doing, to be transfigured ourselves.

If we're not transformed, what's the point of going back down the mountain? We'd be down there, no different than anyone else, which leaves the world no different than its always been.

What Peter gets wrong isn't that it's good to be there adoring the transfigured Christ. What Peter gets wrong is thinking he needs to build *three* tabernacles.

Elijah and Moses maybe could have used them, but not Jesus. Jesus' flesh, his humanity, is the tabernacle and that is what makes him unique and special. Here is the evidence that the second coming has occurred and Moses and Elijah had served their purpose of proclaiming the coming of the Lord.

So, as we look towards Lent and on to Holy Week and Easter let our prayer be that we will be transfigured and given new life in the same way that the very human Peter was.

Amen.