

TO BE SURE

March 3, 2019

Epiphany Last - Transfiguration

[2nd Corinthians 3:12-4:1](#)

[Luke 9:28-36](#)

(prayer)

Every year, on the Sunday immediately before Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday, the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) includes the story we heard from Luke today.

The RCL has the church Season of Epiphany begin with magi being guided by the shining light of a star to find Jesus near the beginning of his life; and Epiphany ends (closer to the end of Jesus' life) with another mysterious light that guides the disciples to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

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We don't always hear today's story from Luke; the same event is described in Matthew and Mark as well. The RCL is a three year cycle of suggested scripture readings for Sundays and so, one year we will hear Matthew; the next year, Mark; and in the third year, Luke. It really doesn't matter which version you read, as they are very consistent as to all of the significant details. Matthew copied Mark virtually word for word; Luke made a few noticeable, but minor, edits:

1. instead of using Mark's timeline (six days later), Luke says it happened "about eight days later";
2. Luke adds to Mark's narrative that the purpose of going up the mountain was "to pray";
3. where Mark has the voice describe Jesus as "my beloved", Luke changes that to "my chosen"; and
4. although Luke mentions (like Mark) that the disciples kept quiet about the experience (for a while at least), he excludes the line that this was on Jesus' orders.

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Beyond that, all three gospel versions share the same basic facts:

- about a week after Peter declared that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah and Jesus countered with a teaching about a suffering Son of Man, Jesus, Peter, John, and James go up on a mountain without the other disciples;
- While on the mountain, the three disciples see Jesus' appearance change - Jesus shines very, very brightly;
- During this time of glowing, Jesus is joined by two other people, identified as Moses and Elijah;
- Peter tells Jesus that *it is good* for them to be there and he offers to set up tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses;
- A cloud suddenly covers the area (presumably making it impossible for PJ&J to see), which frightens the disciples and then a voice is heard: *this is my beloved/chosen son, listen to him*;
- And then, in an instant, the cloud is suddenly gone - so are Moses and Elijah - and Jesus appears *normal* again;
- Finally, when they got back to the others, PJ&J did not mention anything about what had happened.

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The fancy word for this story is [The Transfiguration](#) from the Latin for *a change of form*.

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The account of Jesus' Transfiguration is layered with symbolism and significant hints of what Jesus' followers came to believe about him.

John, James, and Peter appear to get a glimpse of an other-worldly Jesus - a heavenly version of

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their rabbi as compared to the earthly version they had come to know.

Jesus is joined by historical figures that - not too subtlety - represent the Hebrew scriptural heritage: the law/torah (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).

And finally, there is the literal voice of God - in case this was all too metaphoric for the disciples - proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God and that they should listen to him!

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No study of the Transfiguration can be complete without noticing that Peter seems to presuming that this physical change in Jesus (and his new *old* companions) was going to be around for a while. He offers to set up a more permanent camp. We are left to wonder whether Peter thought that they would not be leaving this new gateway into the glory of heaven. Perhaps Peter imagined that this location would one day be a new Bethel, like the place Jacob (of old) had envisioned a ladder leading up to heaven.

Whatever Peter's expectations and plans may have been, that all ended when the cloud suddenly disappeared and Elijah and Moses were no longer there.

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Since this reading comes up every year sometime between February 1st and March 10th, I have preached on the Transfiguration a few dozen times. There are lots of details to focus on.

This year, I went to key in on the impact of the Transfiguration rather than the event itself. I want to spend a few minutes imagining what went on with the disciples after the fact.

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I have to "imagine" how James, John, and Peter reacted because the gospel texts are pretty quiet beyond what we read in Luke 9:36 - *They kept silent and (in those days) told no one any of the things they had seen.* Mark and Matthew's version of that goes: *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.* The only hint about how the disciples reacted comes from a single phrase that only Mark includes: *they questioned what this rising from the dead could mean.* If Mark is the oldest gospel and was used as a base text by Matthew and Luke (as the dominant biblical scholarship suggests), it is worth wondering why they latter two chose to edit it out.

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Mark's comment notwithstanding I have to believe that (individually and most likely huddling together) that Peter, James, and John weren't all that sure about what they had seen and (definitely) what it might have meant.

I am extremely confident that the whole experience was not ignored or forgotten or sloughed off as insignificant by this inner circle of Jesus' disciples.

The fact that the story survived into the decades after Jesus' life time relatively intact tells us that it was remembered. The event is also referred to in the late first century letter of 2nd Peter. Although almost certainly written too late to be from the actual Simon Peter, it may include later sources from the Peter tradition.

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Here's what I imagine:

As soon as the cloud lifted, one of them has to have said: *Wait! Where did they go?*

I wonder if Jesus sat with them and answered their questions. All we know for sure is that (at some point before they rejoined the others), PJ&J agreed not to share the story of what had

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happened... probably because Jesus asked them not to.

Even so, amongst themselves, I have to believe that they tried to attach some meaning to the experience: *Ok, what just happened here?*

I imagine that it was the main topic on the path back down into the valley and probably came up a number of times when these three found themselves apart from the others.

And... I suspect that, whatever they thought it all meant, they certainly thought about it again after the Risen Christ appeared to them following Jesus' crucified. Building on Mark's Transfiguration final line, at *that* point they would have had an answer to their question about *what this rising from the dead could mean*.

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It is human nature, when confronted with uncertainty to try and learn what we can to understand our situation with more certainty. There is a reason why one of the first questions we all learn to ask as children is "why?"

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Peter wanted to install a level of certainty to that mountain top experience. He wanted to freeze the moment and make it last. Instead, he and the others are invited to trust in the mystery.

This forced acceptance of mystery, of course, was carried into a time of imposed secrecy, when it would be more difficult to work out what it all meant.

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Accepting a level of mystery was a theme that the apostle Paul shared with the Christians in Corinth.

Paul wrote that there are limits how completely we can experience the fullness of God. In First Corinthians, chapter thirteen, the apostle used a couple of **now** and **then** statements to illustrate that there is mystery not yet known. Paul compares this to how people continue to learn as they grow from children into adults.

Now we see in a mirror, dimly,

Then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part,

Then I will know fully.

We heard that theme again the reading from Second Corinthians today, when Paul made reference to the exodus story of how Moses' face shone after he had glimpsed the presence of God while up on Mount Horeb in the Sinai wilderness. This hint of God's glory (glowing through Moses) was too much for some of the people to handle. Out of concern for *their* discomfort, Moses took to wearing a scarf over his face. But even when they saw that scarf, they had to still know what mysteries it was shrouding.

And yet, Paul wrote that there comes a time when the veils will drop and the mystery will be revealed. For Paul, knowing Jesus is like seeing a mirror-reflected version of God's glory.

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Peter, James, and John caught a veiled glimpse of the glory of God embodied in Jesus, but it was brief and mysterious. They simply could not be 100% sure about what they saw and what it meant.

And yet, as Paul would profess a few decades later, now it may be imperfect, but faith inspires us to believe a more complete version waiting to be revealed.

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Allowing ourselves to be *inspired* is (literally) to let the spirit come into our lives (in-spirited). The presence of God's spirit is more mysterious than tangible.

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We are not all that different from Peter and Paul. We have glimpses... hints... that indicate the existence of a fuller mystery.

"Faith" - by definition - is being sure that we aren't quite sure. Living with mystery is our calling.

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The Corinthians were told that *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* and *since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not* need to *lose heart*.

Accepting a greater, as yet unseen, mystery is enough. As we draw closer to our God and allow the compassion of God to fill us, we will find that we are shining a holy love to others.

This glimpse of glory is not an invitation to isolate ourselves as if we were clinging to a mountain shrine, but an invitation to free ourselves from the assumption that we already know all that we can and that we have no more room to learn and grow.

Now, we know in part, even though God fully knows us. And yet, we have been created with the capacity to expand our horizons.

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To be sure... even through our imperfect, sometimes veiled, ways and means of following the way of Jesus, the glory of god can still illuminate this world we share.

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Let us pray:

Holy God, fill us with the warm glow of your compassion. Each day, we are part of your transformation of the world. Amen.

offering