

WPC
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Transfiguration
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

Both of our texts this week talk about what many Christians call mountaintop experiences. Have you ever had that kind of experience in your life, a time when you went away and were confronted by the awesomeness of God? This often happens when you go away to a camp or on a retreat. The high you can get from a mountaintop experience is amazing, but the challenge is how our lives are changed when we come down from the mountain.

Our first reading from Exodus is about what happened to Moses after he spent forty days on Mount Sinai with the Lord God Almighty, receiving the Ten Commandments for the second time. While he was up there, he asked to see God's glory and God obliged, passing by so that Moses saw his back.

When Moses saw God's back, an interesting thing happened: God's glory was so overpowering that some of it rubbed off on him. When he came down the mountain, the skin of his face was shining, and people were afraid of him. So Moses put a veil on his face. But whenever Moses went to

speaking with God or came back to tell the people what God had said, he removed the veil so everyone could see his shining face. The people could see God's glory reflected in Moses.

The same thing happened to Jesus a thousand years later. "His mountain was in Israel, not in Egypt, but it was clearly the same glory that enveloped him." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

As Peter, James, and John watch Jesus, he's transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, appear and talk with Jesus. Their appearance with Jesus shows the continuity of Jesus' ministry with the Old Testament.

After seeing this incredible event, Peter brashly jumps in and offers to make them three dwellings (literally tents). Someone has said that there are only two kinds of speakers: those who have something to say; and those who have to say something! Peter was someone who just had to say something. He often blurted out whatever came to his mind, without stopping to think whether it made sense or not, and without considering the consequences. So he makes this proposal that earthly dwelling places be built for these three servants of God.

At that point, they hear the voice of God from a cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” This scene is reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus, with the voice from heaven declaring the identity of Jesus as God’s Son. However, whereas the voice spoke directly to Jesus at his baptism, here the voice speaks to the disciples.

One commentator says, “In the transfiguration, the disciples of Jesus are given a peek, a preview of who he is and his meaning for their lives.” This is a scene where the disciples recognize who Jesus is because he’s shown in his full glory.” (William Willimon)

The Transfiguration is located at about the halfway point in Luke’s Gospel. It’s the pivot point where Jesus starts to point toward his death. In fact, 7 verses later, Jesus predicts his death, but the disciples are unable to perceive what he’s saying.

The point is that on the way to the cross, the curtain is pulled back and we get a glimpse of who Jesus really is – the Son of God, God with us. It’s kind of the opposite of The Wizard of Oz, when the curtain was pulled back and the person we thought was an all-powerful wizard turns out to be just a regular guy. Here when the curtain is pulled back, there can be no mistake for the disciples – this is God they’ve been walking around with. In The

Wizard of Oz, the real wizard hid behind a curtain. Here, the real glory of Jesus is revealed when the curtain is pulled back and Jesus is transfigured.

Simon Peter wants this marvelous moment to go on forever: “Rabbi, it’s good for us to be here; let me make three dwelling places for you here on earth.” For Peter, this is the way it’s supposed to be: here is God’s real glory, without suffering, without death.

Notice that Jesus is silent. He doesn’t respond to Peter’s offer. The disciples may have been permitted a glimpse into the future, but they don’t own that future. All time, past, present, and future, are in God’s hands. Fred Craddock points out that “for these disciples, and all who follow, there is one more mountain to climb – Calvary [Golgotha],” the mountain that contains the cross.

So how does this glimpse of his glory help us today, when we’re no longer on the mountaintop and we’re facing the challenges of trying to daily live out our faith?

I find Barbara Brown Taylor’s insights to be helpful: “What we are asked to believe is that at certain breakthrough moments in time, the glory of God is certifiably visible...But seeing it may not be the most important thing because we are also asked to believe in it when we cannot see it, when we

are stuck in dark rooms we do not even know the contours of and we cannot find the light. In situations like that, all we have are the stories. Stories are strong, once you decide to believe in them. They can change your life, and if we believe in these two about Moses and Jesus, then we live in a different world from people who do not.

We live in a world where glory is possible, where light may break through any moment... You never know when a face may begin to shine, including your own, but even when we cannot see the light, we believe in it, because we have heard the stories. We know that God's glory is pulsing just beneath the surface of things, with power to transfigure the darkest of our days." (BBT, Bread of Angels, 6-7).

But why didn't God's glory show when Jesus was on the cross? The Transfiguration was a private event, with only three witnesses. Later, when Jesus' face was bloodied and those clothes torn into rags, his face did not shine and his clothes did not dazzle on the cross. Why did God hide all the glory on the mountain, where no one could see? Why didn't God save it for the cross?

Taylor thinks it's because then it would have been a different kind of death from the kind most of us die, and that would not have worked. To lead

our journey to salvation, Jesus had to die like we do: alone, with no particular glory.

“Otherwise he would have been an anomaly instead of a messiah, and it would have been hard for us to see what he had in common with the rest of us. As it was, he died very much like those who died on either side of him, one of them begging to be saved from what was coming, the other asking to be remembered when Jesus got where he was going. Jesus could not do anything for the one who wanted to be spared, but he did a great favor for the other. He told him that the darkness was a dazzling one, with paradise in it for both of them.” (Christian Century, Feb. 1998)

We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future. The light of God shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it. Amen.