



Transfiguration Sunday

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 27 February 2022

READINGS

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36,

Transfiguration

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which concludes the season of Epiphany in our three year cycle. This being Year C, we hear the story of the Transfiguration as recorded in Luke's Gospel 9: 28-36.

You may be familiar with the story since it is presented in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and has its own special day on the calendar. Since we are going to include the follow-up story, it may be helpful to see the Transfiguration as a hinge story in the liturgical calendar. The Season of Epiphany is all about seeing God's glory. It is a season of seeing the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We look at the stories and passages in Scripture during the Epiphany Season, when we come to see more fully who God is in his character and being. We call this having an "epiphany" because what was once hidden is now made plainly visible. Then we have the season culminate with Transfiguration Sunday.

As a magnified story, we see God's glory revealed in Jesus in a way that can only be described by imagery and metaphor. It is a true story, but fantastic, nonetheless. After Transfiguration Sunday, the Epiphany season gives way to the season of Lent. Typically, this is a season of repentance (and if you think carefully, repentance means changing the way we think and behave). This makes sense when you follow the logic of Epiphany. When something that has been hidden is suddenly revealed, then one must change how one thinks or behaves towards this new reality. And that is why Lent, a season to repent, naturally follows Epiphany, a season of revelation. In that way, Transfiguration Sunday serves as a hinge story, turning the pages of Epiphany naturally onto the pages of repentance in the story of our journey with the Lord. Also, for us today, seeing the Transfiguration story as a hinge story will also give us some insight to the transfiguration story which all three evangelists, Luke Matthew and Mark, chose to include.

The story of the Transfiguration takes place "about eight days" after the Confession of Peter (9:18-20). The event happens on mountain (Mount Tabor), a place of special revelation. Both Moses and Elijah had received revelation on mountains. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17). Elijah fled to Mount Horeb, and there God spoke to him in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12, NRSV; RSV: "a still small voice"). It is those two men who appear on the mountain with Jesus and his companions. Traditionally we have associated the figures of Moses and Elijah as representing the law and the prophets, but in the account of Luke's story of the Transfiguration, there is another layer of importance to the two men. Both Moses and Elijah have been on mountains to receive revelation; they are expected to appear at the coming of the messianic age (see Deuteronomy 18:15 concerning Moses; Malachi 4:5 concerning Elijah); and both had been taken into heaven and thereby were privileged to know God face-to-face and to know God's will.

Luke, in his account of this story, goes on to share the content of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah. He says that Moses and Elijah “were speaking of Jesus’ departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem” (9:31). They speak then of Jesus’ departure from this world through his suffering, death, and resurrection into heaven, the place where they dwell with God. The Transfiguration of Our Lord is a day that gives those at worship a glimpse of the coming future glory of Christ on Easter. But it also reminds us that the way to Easter is through the cross. A few verses later, at 9:51, Luke writes that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” where all that has been spoken of will take place for him. And for the worshipping congregation, we know that Lent begins on this coming Wednesday.

Mountain top experiences are a natural part of life. They are special times of spiritual significance. They may be times of excitement or times of quiet renewal. The Gospel writers tell us of many times when Jesus withdrew to the wilderness, into a desert place or up on a mountain. These wilderness experiences were often, not always, associated with significant events in his life: These glowing moments can be times of decision. Faced with the mountain and its gifts, we have to choose what we will do in response.

Some, like the Pharisees, and even the disciples to some extent (based on the conversation which arises over bread in Chapter 16), simply miss or dismiss the mountain experience. If it’s even acknowledged at all, it is taken to be a nice experience with no real significance, requiring no real change on our parts. When Jesus was transfigured, the glory of God was revealed. God’s indescribable beauty was uncovered, like a veil had dropped. What had been hidden was made plain to Peter, James, and John for just a flash of a moment. It was beautiful, and terrible, and awesome all at the same time. But they couldn’t stay up there forever – they had to leave the mountaintop to return to the world below them, a world that was full of pain, anguish, suffering, and even the ugliness that we are familiar with. We can choose to dismiss the mountain and its gifts. But, if we do, we lose the courage, the hope, the possibilities and the resolve to face life’s suffering and sacrifices in order to strive for the better world, the better life that God calls us to.

The opposite temptation is to idolise the mountain. This was Peter’s response. All he wanted was to set up camp, capture the moment and stay there. , ignoring the relationships, the realities and the needs of the valley below. Such glowing experiences can easily become addictive, as we know all too well. It is not uncommon to find people who go from church to church or from conference to conference in search of the next ‘high’ the next ‘amazing encounter with God’, yet who never really learn to function effectively in the world, or make any kind of contribution. And as with all idolatry, making the mountain-top experience our whole focus diminishes it, robs it of its power, and leaves us, like junkies, searching for our next fix in order to feel good about ourselves.

Finally, there is a third possible response to the mountain-top, and it’s the one Jesus chose. It’s the choice to engage, both with the experience, and with the reality that we must face when the experience is over. While on the mountain, Jesus is fully present, embracing his transfiguration, engaging in conversation with Moses and Elijah. But, once the vision is over, he is ready to return to the valley as soon as possible, and get on with the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. I wonder whether, while praying in Gethsemane, Jesus returned in his mind to this experience and drew courage from it. I wonder whether his ability to be fully engaged in his suffering, to reject the pain numbing drink offered to him (in 27:24) and to remain compassionate in the midst of his rejection and agony was because he had been equally engaged in this mountain-top experience.

The disciples’ understanding of Jesus changed when they saw him transfigured. In reality, they finally saw who Jesus was for the first time. It was at that moment the scales of their misperceptions fell away as well and they had a new kind of vision when they climbed down the mountain. Even though they made many mistakes afterward and still didn’t completely understand Jesus’ ultimate mission until after his

resurrection, their experience on the mountain taught them a new way of seeing the world and the people around them.

So it is for us. Even when we have a mountaintop experience, this is no guarantee that our lives will be totally changed forever. What the experience can do for us, however, is to give us a glimpse of what our lives might be like if we pay attention to the leading of the Spirit and allow it to move and transform us. Can you imagine how differently all of us would see the world if our misperceptions and fears that we cling to were allowed to fall away?

This is a great passage to lead us toward Lent, which begins this week - a season that is all about discerning what it is that we cling to, and what we need to practice letting go of in order for Christ to become more clear to us. As we enter into Lent this Wednesday, let us ask ourselves individually, "What am I clinging to that keeps me from seeing the light of Jesus in my life? What am I clinging to that prevents Jesus using me to bring the light to others?" Let this Lent be a time of revelation, inspiration, and transformation.

Amen.