

EXODUS 34:29-35 (p. 73)

FEBRUARY 27, 2022

LUKE 9:28-36 (p. 841)

BLAINE

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Turn us in the right direction Lord, so that we will witness your Radiant Face. Remove the scales from our eyes Lord, so that we might see your Smile. Unstop our ears, so that we might clearly hear your Voice. And settle our wandering minds, so that we will truly understand the depth of your Love. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“DOES IT SHOW?”

Every year, on Transfiguration Sunday, the Lectionary brings us Peter, James and John traveling with Jesus up to the top of a mountain to pray. There He is Transfigured, filled with the Glory of Heaven! His true, Godly Nature is revealed! His outward form, His visible appearance is dramatically changed! The Greek root word is “metamorphoo”. It's obviously where we get the English word “metamorphosis”. This is a transformational experience! So, every year we talk about this awe-filled moment. Some years we listen to Matthew's account. Other years Mark's. Still other years, like this year, we hear what Luke has to say. But every year we share this event. And every couple of years or so, I share the story of a young Theologian named Sally. Maybe you remember?

Sally was a precocious eight-year-old who really liked Church. And she paid attention. So, one Sunday, on the way home, Sally was burdened with a question. “Mom,” she said, “The Pastor, in his sermon today, said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” “Why yes Sweetheart, that's true.”

“Then Miss Kim, in the Children’s Moment, said that after we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, He lives in our heart. Is that true too mommy?” “Yes Honey, that’s true too”. “Well, if God is bigger than we are, and He lives in our heart, then shouldn’t He show through?”

What a great question, right? Out of the mouths of babes! Up on a mountaintop, Jesus’ Heavenly Nature is revealed! It burst forth, right through His humanity! His future Glory becomes visibly evident in the here and now! Three of His Disciples witnessed it! So, Sally’s question is relevant, isn’t it?

When we accept Jesus as Lord, we are promised God’s Spirit! As a Follower of Jesus—God Himself, the Maker of Heaven and Earth—the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the Waters of Creation—Jesus Christ, the Word by which, and through whom everything was made, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us—are now manifest within us! So, does that Truth show?

Does the Presence of God radiate from you, and through you, and around you like a beacon? Does God’s Glory illuminate your path, and that of those around you? Does the glow of Jesus’ Love encompass everything that you say and do, like an “Angelic Aura”? Does your Faith sparkle in your eyes? When you’ve been to Worship, after you have spent time in the Presence of God—studied His Word, knelt before the Lord in Prayer—do the folks around you see a change? Do they know? Or not? Do they see a difference? Do your Divine Encounters show?

For several weeks now we've been talking about what it means to be the Church. So, what we are asking here is, do our lives, as part of the Body of Christ witness to the Lord's Presence? It is truly a great question! A tough question though, at least if we are honest! An important question, to be sure! When you spend time with God, can people tell?

Moses, in our first reading this morning, climbs up onto a mountaintop in order to stand in the Presence of the Lord. This is the second time that he has gone up onto the flame-encased summit of Mount Sinai, the second time that he goes to hear what the Lord has to say. It's also the second time that he returns with the Commandments of God in hand.

Moses approached God as an emissary, an ambassador really, on behalf of the People of God. But also, with a personal agenda. Moses wanted to witness the Glory of God first hand, face-to-face! Only after he did, he was changed—emotionally, and spiritually, and even physically! He wanted to see God with his own eyes! In fact, he insisted on it! And God, in His Grace, honored that request, with a few slight modifications. Since no one could see the Face of God and live, the Lord made a compromise. He tucked Moses into a cleft in the rock, and then covered him with His hand. Then, after He passed by, He removed His hand so that Moses could gaze upon his back.

Prior to this, Moses had heard the Word of God. At the Burning Bush, remember! And he had seen what God could do, with the plagues in Egypt, water from a rock, manna and quail, the parting of the Red Sea! But now, Moses has experienced the Presence of God. And in the process, has been changed forever! “From that time on,” we’re told, “his face was so radiant that he had to wear a veil!” So, do we, as members of Christ’s Church—do you, as a Follower of Jesus—need to wear a veil? Not a mask! A Veil!

Jesus took Peter, and John, and James with Him, up onto a mountain to pray. And while they were there He was Transfigured before their eyes! “His face was changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning,” writes Luke. “As white as the light,” says Matthew. “Dazzling white,” says Mark “whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them!” Then Moses, the great Law-Giver, and Elijah, one of the Greatest Prophets of all times, appeared with Jesus, and talked with Him about what would soon take place!

Remember, everything that Peter and John and James know about God, is based on these two Pillars of Faith, the Law and the Prophets! It’s through these that they have learned about the coming of Messiah! Now Moses and Elijah are talking with the Transfigured Messiah, The Son of God! Try to imagine what that was like!

And then the Audible Voice of God is heard from Heaven, just as it was at Jesus’ Baptism! “This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him”! I don’t know if it was a great big, booming voice or not! Luke doesn’t really say. But Matthew tells us that “they fell facedown on the ground, terrified,” so I can certainly assume!

And then, suddenly, Jesus was all alone! The Law and the Prophets were gone! Now, only Messiah remains! That might be an interesting Theological discussion sometime!

Like I said, we look at this encounter every year. So, I have to assume you're familiar with it. And if you've spent much time in Church, you have probably noticed that Preachers tend to take one of two tracks when talking about this text. The first is to focus on the Glory at the very heart of the passage, the "mysterium tremendum" in Latin. The Transfiguration clearly foreshadows the Glory of the Son of God in the Resurrection, and throughout Eternity! The awe, and wonder, and majesty are obviously a central point!

Just prior to this encounter, in fact, Peter publically declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God! And right after that confession Jesus starts to teach about His upcoming Passion and Crucifixion, about His death and Resurrection! Immediately after this mountaintop event, Jesus predicts His death a second time. The Truth of "who He is," and "what He came to do" sit like Bookends on the Transfiguration! So, pointing to the revealed Glory of God, makes perfect sense!

The second approach though, also makes sense. Sometimes Preachers tend to focus on the work that happens down in the valley, after the mountaintop experience. As Jesus and the Disciples are walking down from the mountain, they are confronted with a real human need! A man possessed by an evil spirit is healed. There are several healings, in fact, on the pages ahead. There is a lot of hurt down in the valley, and a lot of teaching that needs to take place.

Peter wanted to stay up on the mountaintop, remember, to remain in the Presence of Glory, build booths, or set up tents, so that everyone could stay! But Jesus knows there is ministry to be done, which is done down in the valley!

There are actually several places in Scripture where mountains are metaphors for places one might encounter the Presence of the Living God. And almost all of them speak about the experiences at the summit. But then, almost all of them talk about what happens after the descent back down as well. I can see why these are often the homiletic focus of today's text. Like I said, it makes sense! But I want to take a different approach today. I want to talk about the journey up the mountain, into the Presence of God. Because that's where we are! Let's see if we notice anything we might have missed before.

I've done a bit of rock climbing in my life, including in Arches National Park. And I've hiked more than a few mountain trails, including the Appalachian Trail with my grandson, and the Bee Hive Trail in Acadia National Park with my wife, while we were on Sabbatical. And I can tell you, it takes preparation to get ready for an adventure like that! So, staying with the metaphor of climbing up into the Presence of God, what would you say we need to do, to prepare for an experience like that?

We have been traveling some already, through the season of Epiphany. For about six weeks now in fact. And come Wednesday, we will begin the Journey of Lent. Remember, an Epiphany is an "Aha" moment, when you get it, when you suddenly realize "who God is"!

The Wise Men had an Epiphany, and brought gifts to the Manger. The Shepherds had an Epiphany, and came to worship the new-born King. At Jesus' Baptism lots of people had Epiphanies as the Holy Spirit descended like a Dove, and a voice from Heaven said, "This is my Son"! At the Empty Tomb, Mary and several others had powerful Epiphanies! But they had to journey through Good Friday first, and the Last Supper. And the stark emptiness of Holy Saturday. First, their hearts had to be prepared!

Our journey started at the Manger as well, remember, with our Lord lying humbly, and apparently helpless. And now we see Him Transfigured, revealed for who He really is! Before long we will see Him hanging on a Cross, with a bloody Crown of Thorns hanging on His head. Again, humbly, and apparently helpless. But then we will witness the Glory of Easter morning, the Mountaintop of our Faith! That takes a journey though, in order to get there from here. We need to prepare. We call that journey Lent.

Robert Morris, in an article in "Weavings" titled "Riding the Wild Mountain Ox" describes a mountain ascent as "a particularly apt symbol for the challenge of changing vistas, climates, and the dangers the psyche is likely to face, as our capacity for God is stretched and strengthened." This Journey will take work. And before we start, it might be wise to map out our ascent!

One of my all-time favorite movies is, "A Walk in the Woods". It reminds me of someone I love. It is a wonderful story about Bill Bryson's attempt, with a friend, to hike the entire Appalachian Trail.

Early on, the central characters, Robert Redford and Nick Nolte, begin hiking up the gentle sloping access trails that lead to the trailhead on Springer Mountain in north Georgia—which then moves on towards their ultimate destination 2,190 miles away on Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Despite all of their excitement and planning and preparation, their first day out was simply awful, as first days on hiking trips often are! They quickly realize that they are hopelessly out of shape—hopelessly! Their packs weigh way too much! Bryson writes “I had never encountered anything so hard, for which I was so ill prepared. Every step was a struggle. The hardest part was coming to terms with the constant dispiriting discovery that there is always more “hill”!

“The thing about being on a hill,” he says, “as opposed to standing back from it, is that you can almost never see what’s to come. Between the curtain of trees at every side, the every-receding contour of rising slope before you, and your plodding weariness, you gradually lose track of how far you have come. Each time you haul yourself up to what you think must surely be the crest, you find that there is in fact more hill beyond. The angle of the slope kept it from view before. And beyond that slope there is another, and beyond that another and another, and beyond each of those more still, until it seems impossible that any hill could run on so long!”

“Eventually you reach a height where you can see the tops of the topmost trees, with nothing but clear sky beyond, and your faltering spirit stirs—nearly there now!”

“But this is a pitiless deception. The elusive summit continually retreats by whatever distance you press forward, so that each time the canopy parts enough to give a view, you are dismayed to see that the topmost trees are as remote, as unattainable, as before. Still, you stagger on. What else can you do?”

As tough as it was, Bryson loved the journey! And it changed his life forever! But if we didn't know that this was a description of hiking the Appalachian Trail, we might see it as our Journey of Faith? Or at least the Journey of Faith that some of us have experienced? Often times, when we start out, it seems like we are on level paths, smooth-going, with scarcely a tree root, or icy patch anywhere to trip us up! But then, as we grow, our trek becomes more complex, with hills that we must climb, and steep rocky paths, with perils and pitfalls along the way! There are even times when reaching our destination, or even our own survival, come into question!

Aren't we tempted, in the flatlands, when everything is smooth and easy, to ignore God, and to see our progress as an illusion of self-sufficiency? Don't we then, when the path gets steep and treacherous again, cry out in anxiety and fear? And when we reach the summit, or a plateau, or resting place along the way, isn't it here that we catch a glimpse of God's Grace, or maybe even His Glory? Isn't it here, in response, that we experience a sense of profound Gratitude? It's no wonder that when we reach this higher ground, we want to stay right there! Maybe even set up some tents, and freeze the moment in time!

Doctors tell us that climbing, in altitude, requires a number of physiological adjustments. There is an increase in respiration, and a corollary change in the PH of our blood. This allows an increase in the number of oxygen-carrying red blood cells, which makes things easier. But this conversion often takes weeks, and sometimes happens quite gradually, or in stages! We reach plateaus, and need to adjust before moving on to the next! Well, our spiritual ascent requires adjustments too—adjustments in our thinking, and in our feeling, and most of all in our will! Maybe Peter just needed a little time to catch his breath, a little time to take it all in!

You know it helps me to see my Faith Development as a Journey, mostly because I'm still climbing. And I hope, and pray, that all of you are as well. I have witnessed some wonderful sights along the way already! And I've had moments when I was sure I was at the summit! I've stopped to rest for a while on a quiet hillside, or in a mountain glade filled with flowers, surrounded by beautiful sights and sounds! But the truth is, I'm still climbing. I can show others some of the potholes that I've stepped in along the way. And even a few that I somehow was able to avoid! But I can only do this, if I am willing to share my experience!

So, how about you? Do people know of your encounters with God? Can they see them on your face, and in your life? Do they show? Did they at one time? Should they again? Have you stopped to rest for too long on your Journey, and now it's time to move again? Are you sharing that? In the words of a young Theologian, "If God is bigger than you are, and lives in your heart, then shouldn't it show? And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Your Glory, Lord, washes over us in waves. We see it in the sparkling tree branch encased in ice, and notice it as the sun finally peaks through the clouds. We hear it in a waterfall Lord, or in a newborn's cry. And we sense it here, in praise and prayer. You are the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Creator of all that we see, and all that we don't. And from time-to-time you give us a glimpse of all this! Thank you, Jesus, for making yourself known, and for standing beside us in the Father's Holy Presence. And thank you for enabling us to share this truth in an ever-darkening world.

As your people, Father, we claim your promise of Salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ. And as your people we acknowledge Him as the Lord of our lives! We know who you are Lord, or at least we know enough of who you are. And so, we entrust all that we do, and all that we are, and all that we will ever become, into your abiding care.

Open us up to your Presence Lord, even more than we have ever been before. Encounter us Lord, and change us, and mark us with your Holy Name. And then Lord, send us out so that others might see. Cause our faces to shine Lord, to reflect your glorious love. And cause our lives to be a bold witness to you.

This morning Father, we bow before you in prayer, placing the lives of our loved ones into your compassionate arms. We have personally experienced your Grace Father, and received your Blessings, and felt your Love. And so now, we ask these things for those we love as well. Please be with..... Pour out your Grace on each of these lives Father, and on this Church, and on all who call Jesus Lord. For it is in His Name that we ask these things, and in His Name that we pray now saying, Our Father...