

Transfiguration of Our Lord – Year C

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer

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“Boy, I sure hope someone can explain that one,” Chuck would often remark after passages like this gospel reading came up in Bible study at the congregation I served in Topeka. Chuck was well into his seventies when I knew him and would be in his eighties now. None of the accounts of the transfiguration ever came up in those studies, but I can hear him asking the question just the same. Much too slowly I realized that the sort of explanation Chuck was seeking in such moments was not a “help me understand this” explanation but rather the kind of explanation so as to make something go away. Chuck had been a middle school principal and a history teacher before that. He was well-schooled in reason, logic, facts, documentation, and he had little use for Biblical stories that seemed to fly in the face of real-life experiences. He did have interest in the Bible ... so long as it didn’t embarrass him.

He’s not alone. Many in our modern times wonder about stories like the transfiguration. I’ve known a few pastors, not just theologians and Biblical scholars, to ask the question: Did this really happen? To such a question, the ancient storytellers scoff and shake their heads. “Silly moderns! Don’t you know stories create their own realities? In that sense, all stories are true.”

Even so, it’s not as if people in ancient times didn’t have their own struggles in these sorts of experiences. Consider our first reading today. This is actually Moses’ second trip down the mountain with the stone tablets inscribed with the commandments of God ... commandments which God first spoke directly to the people from the thundering fiery cloud of glory on Sinai. But then the people of Israel cried out to Moses not to let God speak to them again. “You go up and talk to God; then come back and tell us what God said because if God speaks to us like that again, it’ll kill us.” So Moses went up and while he was away that golden calf thing came out to play ... which led to the literal breaking of the tablets with the commandments when he came back down. Then Moses went up again, negotiated a second chance for the people, glimpsed God’s glory as God passed by ... and then came down the mountain in our reading today ... with his face shining, reflecting the glory of God in which he’d been steeping for some time. But it was still too much for the people – too weird, too scary; they didn’t want to come near. So he put a lid on it to keep them comfortable.

Maybe that’s the deeper issue for the ancients and for us moderns like Chuck. We prefer the physical reality we know and the spiritual reality we believe to keep their proper separation from one another. If one should start creeping in on the other, well then, what could happen?

Anything, really – it would be unpredictable, and worse, uncontrollable. When it comes to the divine presence, distance is generally better than closeness ... except when that closeness could

be on our terms. If something spiritual or even divine were to unexpectedly break into our normal ways, it would be mildly unsettling at the very least. At the greatest extreme, it would be ... does profoundly disruptive and disturbing even begin to come close?

And yet, every now and then, from time to time, at least for some here and there, somehow ... in some way, something that seems purely spiritual ... or maybe something that at least whispers of divine presence creeps into the world we know ... sometimes even into our own lives and experiences. What if the story of the transfiguration really happened, pretty much like we have it in our gospel? Jesus and Peter, James, and John are up on a mountain. And mountain heights have long been associated with “thin places,” a descriptive term for situations in which the barrier between the physical and spiritual seems to become very thin, like a bride’s veil, allowing glimpses from one side to the other. After all, the air is thinner on the mountain heights and the pull of gravity is just a little less ... which might account for some of that sensation of thinness. Furthermore, the disciples are described as either barely fending off sleep or having just been fully awakened from sleep – either way, it’s a state of consciousness long associated with visions. It could happen.

What they see is Jesus transformed – changed in kind of being; you could read the word as *species*. Jesus is suddenly very different than how they have known him prior to that moment. It’s still the same Jesus, but yet different nonetheless. His skin is shining and his clothing is bright like a flash of lightning; it’s not so much a color as it is sheer brilliance. Along with this transformed Jesus, they see Moses and Elijah – two prophets from earlier times with strong connections to mountain heights. Moses, we’ve already covered. But Elijah, too, went up that same mountain Moses ascended and encountered God in the sound of sheer silence ... after having fled to that place from the mountain heights of Carmel ... where he called the people of Israel to choose whom they would serve: the God of their ancestors or Baal of Queen Jezebel ... then he challenged the priests of Baal to a contest of dueling sacrifices, the God who answers by fire wins. You might recall how that one turned out.

These two are conversing with Jesus as the disciples awaken to see, discussing Jesus’ own Exodus event soon to come in Jerusalem. Peter utters something about building shrines for them, more out of instinct than any clear idea. Elijah and Moses fade out and then there’s a cloud ... or perhaps it that veil between the physical and the spiritual collapsing around them. Then a voice proclaims: This is my son, the chosen one; listen to him ... listen, as in take heed; do not let the words simply enter your ears but take them to heart.

And then it’s all over. Everything is as it was when Peter, James, and John first went up that mountain with Jesus. They all go back down. The three disciples – including Peter – all keep silent. That they said nothing to anyone in those days carries within it an implication of announcement that they had been tasked to make. But they say nothing to anyone.

We understand. What could they say? Whom could they tell? Would anyone believe what they had to say, if they actually did say something? An experience like this is almost something that has to be seen first-hand in order to be believed. Otherwise, people might think you were crazy or smoking something or whatever. So how can those who weren’t there ever see it for themselves so that they might believe as well? Those who saw it would have to show it.

*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.* So writes Paul to the community of believers in Corinth ... Paul, whom no account of the Transfiguration puts anywhere near that mountain and those events. Yet, Paul knows something of this same sort of transformation ... of the glory of the Lord being seen, shining as a reflection in the faces of the believers ... of being changed, transformed, by the actions of the Spirit from one degree of glory to another ... from reflectors of the glory into the image of Christ.

This is for you, baptized and beloved children of God. By the gift of the Spirit dwelling in you, you are already reflectors of the divine glory even now, as you are, in the midst of all you do as you go about your lives. That is glorious in itself – that God loves you, accepts and welcomes you, just as you are. But it gets even better. God loves you as you are – and loves you too much to let you stay that way. So with that love and welcome, there is also transformation into something even more glorious: the very image of Christ.

Much as we like the sound of glory – glory already and even more to come, we don't necessarily like the change part. But there it is. We shall be changed. We are already being changed. Wonder who signed you up for that one? Put the blame on whoever it was who, in Christian love, brought you to be baptized ... if you want. But if you've already affirmed the gift of that baptism ... you know, as in confirmation ... or when you joined this congregation ... or occasions when we've done it as part of a service here ... say like last month at the start of this Epiphany season ... well then, you're the one who did it, who made the promises, who signed up for it.

It's true for us as individuals, as believers in Jesus, as disciples of Christ, followers who are to walk in imitation of this Jesus called the Christ. This following and practicing and becoming is the stuff of the life of faith, the baptismal journey. And in the following and the practicing and the becoming there is the changing and the transforming from one glory to another, from beloved baptized child of God into transformed bearer of the image of the transforming Christ. It happens; it happens as the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in each of us ... and in all of us in our dwelling together in the light of God.

What's true for each of us as individual believers is also true for all of us together as an expression of the body of Christ, this community of faith called together as Lutheran Church of the Redeemer here on Dale Street between Iglehart and Carroll in Saint Paul, Minnesota. As a community, we are also always being changed ... always made new ... always being transformed from one degree of glory into another.

We've been spending the past year celebrating the rich heritage of our past, recalling a number of grand and truly glorious moments. Perhaps recalling such moments, we might look around at the present and wonder if the best days for this congregation are indeed behind us, lament what has been and now seems lost, and worry at what the future might hold ... if there is a future to be had. The good news today is not only is there a future (for there is always a future with God!) ...

not only can we be changed, but we are already being changed and transformed. That's the work of the Spirit. It isn't all on us or totally up to us, but we can choose to participate in it.

How might God be working in the here and now for our transformation? How might we better reflect the glory of God to the world around us? Let's talk – Tuesday night ... at a party, a celebration. It will be a time for dreaming, or perhaps visions, if you will. Where is the transforming light of God breaking through in our midst? How might we reflect that light to one another and the world around us?

And then it's Lent ... but it doesn't have to be a bummer. This year for Lent, we'll be looking at those promises we've made in Affirmation of Baptism, exploring the meaning of each promise and how we live it out with our Lutheran Ninjas preparing for confirmation. This need not be a fault-finding expedition, simply an assessment of where we are with those promises ... what's going well and what might become better as we venture forward in the transforming love of God.

Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. Work may be waiting at the foot of the mountain. But we'll only be ready for it if we dwell in the light and carry it down the mountain with us. Amen.