

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this final Sunday in the Epiphany season, it is fitting that the topic is The Transfiguration, as this is a kind of culminating manifestation of Christ as the Messiah and Savior of the world. The word “transfiguration” is not particularly mysterious. It simply means a change in appearance. Thus, “while he was praying, the appearance of (Jesus’) face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. It is certainly an unforgettable image. It stays with us because it is startling and vivid and draped in holy imagery.

And the appearance there of Elijah and Moses tells us a great deal. It *helps us* to keep in mind the overwhelming influence of Hebrew scripture in shaping Jesus and his compatriots, because it can sometimes be hard for us to remember that much of what Jesus taught was from the Old Testament and was not original with him. And this had been true of the prophets themselves. Their mission was to *remind* rather than to invent. I mention this because we often forget that in the early days of the church there were any number of influential believers who had become convinced that the God Jesus was speaking of was a God so unlike the one they recalled from Hebrew scripture that it almost seemed that there were two: one who was judgmental and cruel and the other who was loving and filled with grace. {In fact, when I was teaching EfM (the course for lay Episcopalians developed at the seminary in Sewanee), I frequently heard the same thing from my adult students.} So, it is crucial to be reminded that Jesus was a Jew and drew his inspiration from what we term the Old Testament but which he would have known as the Hebrew scriptures. When we overlook this, we distort, and distortions can be harmful.

In fact, distortions of the kind I’m referring to here can lead us to engage in sinful behavior which – unintentionally -- takes us far from God. Let me tell you briefly about Marcion, an early church thinker in the middle of the 2nd century. Marcion was a dualist who believed that Jesus was sent by God and Paul was his principal apostle. Marcion rejected the Hebrew scriptures (which we call the Old Testament) because the wrathful God depicted there he saw as a lower entity by contrast with the all-forgiving God preached by Jesus and Paul and others. Ultimately, his thinking was declared heretical, but when he went on a crusade to eliminate all of the books of the Bible he regarded as too Jewish, you can appreciate the extent to which this fired the flames of anti-Semitism and left a lasting and terrible legacy. That is why I say we need to embrace the Judaism of Jesus and try to understand it fully, not look down our noses at it as though it were an alien belief system. Christianity apart from Judaism is simply unimaginable.

If we look at the passages selected for today from Luke and Exodus we can see very clearly the debt owed to traditional Judaism in the images evoked by both readings. Fire and cloud as well as light and wind are common Old Testament ways of describing the presence of God. *Glory* was understood as a kind of brilliance or radiant light which referred to God indirectly while also concealing him. The skin of Moses shone because he had been talking with God. And the evocation of Moses recalls the cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness on their way to

the Promised Land. Likewise, in Luke, we have the face of Jesus transformed to demonstrate that he has been praying and drawing close to God, and the cloud that came and overshadowed them is a clear reference to the role of Moses in leading his people out of exile with God's assistance. In fact, the Old Testament sources for The Transfiguration include passages from Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and I Kings.

What is described in Luke would qualify as a *theophany*, a poetic literary form using metaphors and symbols to describe an experience of God, particularly when he is acting to save his people Israel. The connection here with Moses' theophany includes the fact that Moses is one of two men (including Elijah) seen with Jesus on the mountaintop in Luke. Jesus is being connected to the role of Moses as a mediator between God and humankind. And in the scene in Luke, we see Moses representing the instructions given by Yahweh to the people and their relationship to him through the Covenant. Elijah represents all of the prophets of the prophetic books of Hebrew scripture and places Jesus in authentic continuity with the tradition, heightening his claim to legitimacy.

The Transfiguration occurs right after Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah, and it also follows upon Jesus teaching the disciples about his impending death and emphasizing the importance of discipleship. Thus, it seems clear that this passage is also intricately tied up with the upcoming arrest, trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem. We also note here a shift in focus in Luke's gospel from Jesus' preparation and ministry to *the response of others to that ministry*. Also, we can see here a definite increase in concern for discipleship so that the legacy of Jesus can be preserved into the future after his departure.

All of this narrative confirms who Jesus is. He is the incarnate Son of God. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One. This was already announced at his baptism. But here it comes in the context of his impending arrest, trial and execution. We can see in this Luke's way of attesting to the legitimacy of Jesus as Messiah despite his seemingly dishonorable death as a criminal at the hands of the Romans which would have been an unexpected element in a story about the Jewish savior. But Luke takes this further by linking it to the teachings of Jesus on discipleship which would also have been critical to the early church.

And this brings us to the real significance of The Transfiguration at this point in the church year as we approach the season of Lent. It permit us to see clearly the grace and love of God in choosing to reveal his will to the world through a pathway of suffering leading to reconciliation. In other words, here we have God being confirmed in his choice to manifest his intentions in a thoroughly unexpected way. This is *the scandal of the cross*, that through his ignominious death, Jesus would be vindicated by his Father, and the Cross would become a symbol of God's grace, not an allusion to dishonor or defeat. Some have called this the Great Reversal. That is, the kingdom of God will be revealed by a surprising turn of events and by an astonishing change in expectations. The first will be last and the last will be first. By becoming last, Jesus will become first. By willingly submitting to his fate on the cross, Jesus in fact becomes triumphant. By debasing himself, he is raised up. Through humility and sacrifice, he becomes an instrument of God's grace. In what appeared to be dreadful defeat, he was raised up to glory.

Paul understood this when he wrote in his epistle to the Philippians: *“Let the same mind be in you that was in*

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This is the good news of God in Christ Jesus. Let us rejoice in it. Amen.