

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

The story of the Transfiguration is normally read at the end of Epiphany, but the Feast of the Transfiguration occurs on the church calendar in the coming week on Tuesday the 6th of August, so this morning I had a choice of topics for my homily, and I opted for the passage from Luke which describes the Transfiguration of Our Lord. I do this in part because I think many of us find it a peculiar passage, one that is difficult to de-code. We can all use some guidance on this lectionary reading. And since it is not the appointed gospel for today but for August 6, I'll read it to you to refresh your memories.

The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke (9:28-36)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

The word “transfiguration” actually suggests *a temporary change in external countenance*; thus we are witnessing here an extraordinary religious experience, *not* a physical metamorphosis.” It is significant that Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John; these three fishermen together were the ones who “left everything and followed” their Lord when he invited them to learn to fish for men. And Jesus appears here with Elijah and Moses. “The Hebrews themselves believed that any new Messiah that came would have to be in the mold of these two.” They are obviously among the greatest of Hebrew prophets, but they are also men known for having *theophanies* in which they found themselves standing in the very presence of God. In addition, they are part of Israel's eschatological hopes --- that is, her hopes for God's intervention on behalf of his chosen people at the end of time.

Moses looked to the future and foretold the raising up of another prophet like him. In Malachi, Elijah is described as being sent “before the great and terrible day (when) the Lord comes.” They appear here, in part, to encourage Jesus, to remind him that they, too, along with all the hosts of heaven were gearing up for the fulfillment of everything God had been aiming to accomplish ever since sin and evil showed up in His creation to sully God’s intentions.” Through Luke’s artistry, we are also witnesses to a wonderful coalescing of the whole Old Testament heritage of Israel into the ministry of Jesus.

We also encounter typical language for *theophanies* (which are appearances of God to humans) and *eschatological* stories (those focusing on end times): for example, *going up the mountain; light; dazzling raiment, cloud; the voice of God; etc.* The followers of Jesus who heard this passage read aloud would no doubt have thought “this Jesus stands at the end of time!” That is, Jewish listeners would hear this story as “a magnificent testimony that Jesus was the culmination of the prophetic tradition” in Israel. In short, in the Transfiguration we have a “glimpse of the glory of God (*revealed*) *in (the person of) Jesus.*”

As one interpreter has seen things, in the Transfiguration “something numinous (and) ineffable happened.” But it is hard to be more specific about it because it is so mysterious. But “whatever happened on that mountain burned itself into the corporate memory of the early church” which means that it was fundamental to the growth of the faith. But the point for us is “not to go looking for evidence that might demonstrate the historicity of what happened.” Even when its meaning escapes us, the story remains “beckoning, alluring, addressing us” in its utter mystery. And this may be more important than any specific meaning we attach to it through our human reasoning.

But we learn a great deal in the circumstance of the Transfiguration itself. It occurs immediately after Peter’s confession about Jesus and his subsequent teaching to the disciples about his impending death, a reality his faithful followers are incapable of grasping.

And that episode came following Jesus’ question to his disciples: “who do you say that I am?” which tells us that the crux of the matter is his identity.

It is followed by the story of a boy who is so desperately ill that even the disciples cannot bring him healing. There has to be something in this juxtaposition that Luke is communicating, and it seems pretty obvious that it is in *the contrast between the mountain-top vision and the realities of everyday life in the valley below, the valley “where demons shriek and havoc can reign.”*

Also, this event is clearly related to “the looming crucifixion.” The Transfiguration is preparing Jesus for that ultimate tragedy --- his own betrayal, trial, and execution by the authorities in Jerusalem. Moses and Elijah are here speaking with Jesus about his “departure,” but they are using the word for *exodus*, which suggests a going away from enforced servitude into freedom, or a euphemism for death. All is being foretold here. Luke is telling us that “Jesus will enact an event just like the great Exodus from Egypt. If Moses led the Israelites out of slavery and home to the promised land, Jesus will lead all of God’s people out of the slavery of sin and death and home to their promised inheritance -- the new creation in which the whole world will be redeemed.”

The disciples, of course, were overwhelmed by this experience. “As Jesus prepares to make his trek toward Jerusalem, the disciples are simply unavailable to him in any meaningful way.”

They were incapable of understanding what their Lord was telling them about his future because such a future (that of a criminal) was unimaginable for the long-awaited Messiah. And they would not understand until later, when Jesus returned to greet them upon his resurrection. And in time they would piece it together, but we should not be surprised at their inability to comprehend the great human drama occurring before their very eyes. They didn’t know how this story would end, just as we would not have known until it occurred had we been in their place. In our confusion, all we can do is what we are asked to do in this story: **“This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.”**

We are also meant to see in this story a milestone in the ministry of Jesus. Luke’s two books, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, are structured as a journey beginning in Nazareth, circling through Galilee and then turning toward Jerusalem.

The shift from the focus on Galilee to the journey to Jerusalem occurs just 14 verses later in the same chapter of Luke's Gospel which contains the account of the Transfiguration. Thus, it would be fair to say that Luke, like the other gospel writers, saw the real impact of this narrative as "a window into the unfolding of Jesus' ministry."

Most of us recognize that there are moments in life for some individuals when God becomes present in a special non-repeatable way which resists our ability to fully understand. Yet these visions reveal God in ways we would otherwise be unable to discern.

And these theophanies continue to occur, even in the modern world which is so resistant to the notion that such experiences have any reality. Let me give you an example of a vision which occurred in the life of Bill Wilson, a co-founder of A.A., at a time when he was receiving hospital treatment during a period when he was just beginning to put together his winning formula for beating the most powerful of addictions. It is reported that it happened in this way:

"My depression deepened unbearably (Wilson reported) and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gaged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for a moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy crying out, 'If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!'

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man.

Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, 'So this is the God of the preachers!' A great peace stole over me and I thought, 'No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are still all right. Things are all right with God and His world.'

When people have had a vision of God, they tend to recall the goodness, love, and care of The Almighty along with the glory itself in which the experience is bathed.

When Moses asked to see God's glory, the Almighty replied: "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by."

But for the disciples, the full glory of God was fully revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The glory of God is *the paradoxical opposite of all human glory: light revealed in darkness, triumph through defeat, greatness expressed in lowliness, freedom expressed in obedience, life through death.* Jesus entered the way of suffering, and exactly in that way he (had) entered, (he) expressed (or) revealed the heart (and) the glory of *the self-giving God.*”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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