

“The Good News of Transfiguration: See It, Know It, Live It”

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration Sunday

Message for February 27, 2022

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Today I feel led to focus on this week’s Gospel reading. Certainly, we can see that the story from the Book of Exodus provides the background for Jesus’ transfiguration - just as Moses has been talking to God and his countenance is illuminated, Jesus’ face is also changed through prayer and communion with God. His clothing becomes dazzling white as he fully inhabits the understanding of what is to come. His transfiguration takes place on a high mountain, just as Moses’ encounter with God took place on Mount Sinai.

As I have been reflecting on the Bible Wisdom teachings this week, what has washed over me again and again is that I am really relating with Peter on the mountaintop with Jesus right now. I understand the weariness of the disciples on their trip up the mountain with Jesus. I imagine that anyone striving to cope with the relentless challenges of day-to-day living can relate. So although both of today’s readings may initially seem difficult to relate to and hard to understand, if we get inside what might be happening for the people in these stories, we will get closer to recognizing how the human condition remains much the same.

Peter, John, and James - the disciples who walked up that mountain with Jesus - must be exhausted. They had been attending to the nonstop demands of the crowds who had been following Jesus. Prior to today’s text, they were sent off with power and authority into the needy crowds to cure, proclaim and heal. They felt good about their successes and returned to Jesus to tell him all about it.

But when he takes them to “withdraw privately” for a well-earned rest, they are interrupted by more crowds, and the work of ministry continues. It’s been a long day and enough is enough. The weary disciples beg Jesus to send the crowd away. But we know what happens next—they end up feeding thousands of hungry people with the miraculous bounty of bread and fish that Jesus provides.

Finally, they get a day off, but it turns out there is more to attend to. Jesus tells them about the “great suffering” that is to come - that he will be rejected and put to death (treatment they can expect as well) and will rise again on the third day. You can understand why they didn’t really register about the rising part. When you hear about your own potential arrest and death, anxiety and panic stop up your ears.

Eight days later they are still reeling and in no shape for mountain climbing, even if the purpose is to pray. Luke tells us that prayer is the reason for their ascent. I’m sure they were wondering why they couldn’t just pray right where they were.

The image of them wearily climbing feels familiar - I admit that even under the best of circumstances, there are days when my attempt to pray feels like a steep, uphill climb on weary legs. It is my relationship with a nurturing community and my yearning for God that empowers me to get there and make time and space for prayer when it feels like I might not be able to make it.

Once on the mountaintop, Jesus appears to be doing all the praying. His followers can hardly keep their eyes open. But here, before sleep can overcome the three, they are startled by a flash of radiance.

Jesus, who must have reached the summit as sweaty and dusty as they did, now shines with the light of heaven itself. The disciples behold the glory of God. They see two men as well.

Luke tells us that both Moses and Elijah appear in glory. Their presence represents the law and the prophecy, and they are speaking to Jesus of his departure, which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The word *departure* comes from the Greek word for *exodus*, referring not only to the trip down the mountain and into Jerusalem, but to Jesus’ death. This talk of departure and death in the midst of transfiguration is lost on the disciples.

Peter expresses the confusion of his stunned companions by suggesting they remain on the mountaintop. Unlike Peter, I have found the mountaintop of this text an uncomfortable place, perhaps because, unlike Peter, I have not been there.

Each year when this story comes up, I am eager to move off the mountaintop and down to more familiar ground. I feel more at home when they're back down with the needy crowd.

All the transfigurations I've seen—and I have seen some—have been down below. There I have seen lives transfigured, pain cast out, children raised up. These are the transformations for which we work and pray and hope, the transfigurations that brighten our days with wonder and joy. But there are also other days.

This year, I'm less eager to rush down to the bottom of the hill. I'd like to linger on the mountain. I'd like to listen to the voice that interrupts Peter and brings balm: "Listen to him," we are told.

Listen for dear life. Listen to words of forgiveness and mercy, promises of paradise, words from the cross. Listen without ceasing, on the edge of glory and on the brink of death.

"Here is my only begotten son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him." Listen on this hill and on another where darkness closes in.

We are invited, again and again, to awaken to transfiguration. To open up to transformation – to see it, to know it, and to live it.

When we are struggling to follow Jesus off the mountain, when we fail to see what is being illuminated, when the third day seems far off - on such days it is good to be in this story, listening to the voice that urges us to follow on, for the Word shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

While grappling with the impulse to remain right where I am, I was gifted with this blessing written by Jan Richardson for Transfiguration Sunday. It is entitled, "Dazzling." May it illuminate your path forward:

Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.

We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home.
We could stay.

But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.
This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.

It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.
It is not shy.
It is not afraid.

It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray
until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light
you have carried
all this way.

— from “Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons”