

## Transfiguration C (2/7/2016)

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

**Luke 9:28-43a**

*What goes up must come down. We would like to remain forever in the shining moments – moments of sheer joy and wonder and strength – but we can't. Ultimately, transfiguration is about coming down the mountain and making the journey to Jerusalem, to the cross. But God gives us glimpses of glory and grace to sustain us amid the reality of life on the ground, and draws us into moments of transfiguration for the sake of others.*

I am a sucker for mountaineering shows. I love a good documentary about scaling Mount Everest, or K2, or really any wilderness peak. It's a thrill to accompany a team of climbers as they arrive at the edge of civilization, prepare for the physical and mental challenge, and finally ascend into the world's most unforgiving terrain with no guarantee of reaching the summit. The loftiness of the goal, the intensity of the risk, and the magnitude of the accomplishment – it all makes for a great adventure. Who wouldn't want to climb to the top of the world and look out? The lucky ones who make it always capture images of themselves, and they're always beaming with pride. And, for the sake of good television, the mountaintop moment is often the climax of the story. Reaching the summit is the culmination of the journey, the end.

With the story of the Transfiguration in our Gospel from Luke today, it's the reverse. The mystery of the Transfiguration itself tends to draw our attention. Jesus withdraws with a small contingent of his followers, and leads

them up a mountain to pray. At elevation, and in the middle of his prayer, Jesus' face begins to beam, his clothes dazzle, and he is suddenly joined by two legends of the faith: Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet. Peter, John, and James are exhausted, yet they can't help but gawk. Before their very eyes shines the glory of a biblical all-star team, with their rabbi at the center. Imagine the sense of wonder, the sense of pride at witnessing this trio in all their glowing splendor. Who wouldn't want to remain in their presence on the mountain? And Peter insists that they do just that, offering to build three tents, one for each radiant figure. But Peter has missed the point, and his babbling is abruptly consumed by a thick cloud and a booming voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

The scene is sparkling with significance, although it eludes easy explanation. The Transfiguration is a momentary encounter with the fullness of God's glory, a fleeting revelation of Jesus' singular identity as the Son of God. It's a riveting, heavenly experience for the few disciples who are privileged to be there, but then it's over. Jesus doesn't say so much as a word about staying on the mountaintop, but instead leads them immediately back down into a world of ordinary people struggling with their demons, and ordinary disciples struggling to heal them. And, within a few verses of our Gospel for today, Jesus sets out on the definitive journey of his life, the one-way march to Jerusalem, to the cross.

So, the mountaintop moment is not the culmination of the journey, but its starting point. It's not the end, but the beginning. The vision of glory is a highlight, training our eyes to see God's hand in Jesus' work of healing and teaching and sacrificial love after he comes down the mountain. To borrow the words of Heidi Neumark, pastor at Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx, Jesus' transfiguration was "never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public sphere. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level."<sup>1</sup>

Isn't that the way of mountaintop experiences? What have been the moments of transfiguration in your life? A sudden insight during worship? An eye-opening conversation with a trusted friend or teacher? An instance of undeserved grace? A meaningful travel experience? The birth of a child? We would like to remain forever in the shining moments – moments of sheer joy and wonder and strength – but we can't. What goes up must come down. So ultimately, transfiguration is about descending the mountain again. It's about returning to everyday life, to our mostly mundane and exhausting and painful existence with only the memory of the thrill. This is why powerful spiritual experiences – transformative as they may be – tend to fade over time, their vibrant colors muted by the reality of a world in gray.

If you're far removed from the mountaintop today, if you're surrounded by gray, **Jesus' transfiguration is a vision to carry you. It's a flash of light**

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<sup>1</sup> As cited by Lori Brandt Hale, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, 456.

**to shine in the darkness of your fear and uncertainty. It's a memory of your ancestors in the faith, the Moseses and Elijahs and multitudes of saints who bore witness to God's redemption in generations past. And it's an affirmation of Jesus' uniqueness, his God-given authority to speak truth to you and to embody it in his ministry, his death, and his resurrection.**

Dear church, mountaintop moments don't last long, but **God gives us glimpses of glory and grace to sustain us amid the reality of life on the ground.** And even more wondrously, God draws us into moments of transfiguration for the sake of others. As the Apostle Paul proclaims in our second reading today:

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.

When we are afforded opportunities to reflect his light, we become the shining face of Jesus for those who yearn for transfiguration. Our presence can become a source of hope. Our love can become a source of healing. Our commitment to the way of the cross can become a source of inspiration. And, beaming with grace, we can become a vision to carry others.