

March 3, 2019 Transfiguration of our Lord
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GOSPEL

Luke 9:28-43a

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the ninth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now 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. ³³Just 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. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When 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.

³⁷On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴²While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ^{43a}And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

When the glory of God comes close, it is so hard to understand...it is even hard to look at.

This is true across the expanse of time. Not very many people have been allowed to see the glory of God. Perhaps you have seen something close enough to feel how awe...can begin to feel like pain...even though it is also full of joy.

When the glory of God comes close, it is hard to understand...and hard to look at. This was true in the time of Moses...We hear how Moses face would shine after he left the presence of God. And everyone else, from Aaron to every last little Isarelite...was frightened...which, to be fair, I think I would be, too. What is interesting, though, is...well....two things. First, Moses didn't know it was happening until someone else told him...that first time. I wonder how that conversation with Aaron went... Moses comes out of the foothills and sees Aaron a little ways off: "Hey! Why do you looked so freaked out? I can't wait to tell you what happened up there! Can someone grab one of these tablets? They're really heavy..." And Aaron just keeps kind of backing up slowly as Moses gets closer..."Um...you've got something...kind of right...here..." (gesturing at the whole area of his face like someone trying to show you what tooth you have spinach in)..." "What? Where? Seriously what. Just tell me."

It's almost comical – so many of the images on this day. But, I think it may also be important that it took his community to tell Moses how being in the presence of God had changed him.

That's one odd part. The other part that seems odd, on top of the oddity of all the glowing to begin with, is...it sounds like Moses actually didn't always cover his face in front of the people (once he realized it was changed to begin with). It sounds like he put the veil back on for daily wear, maybe...but when he spoke God's word to the people, he *didn't* wear the veil...despite how frightening it may have been. This is a little bit different from Paul's interpretation in 2 Corinthians...but the grammar from Exodus makes it seem like he let the people look at the reflected glory of God...maybe so they would truly feel the fear and love of God which should be our response to God's word and presence...

It is clear that the lectionary composers, who chose which parts of the Bible we would read with which on Sunday mornings, thought the experience of God's glory with Moses on Sinai might have something to do with the glory the disciples witness on the mountaintop with Jesus. Of course, it is not exactly the same.

In an article in *Living Lutheran*, Dr. Cory Driver shared a story from the Jewish mystic text the *Zohar*, which describes what might really happen when humans are in the presence of God.

He writes, "The *Zohar* says that in the beginning humans were naked, but their outer covering was like garments of light. Human skin was overwhelmingly radiant and our image was that of the God who created us. But after humans sinned, God took away our garments of light and gave us garments of skin, [as it says in Genesis 3:21]. [In this reading], these weren't leather garments like the Flintstones wear but our actual skin, which is beautiful and neat, but obscures the inner light we all possess as beloved children of God. So Moses' face shone not because he had gained in radiance but because the veneer of human fallenness wore thin and God's innate image broke through."

Dr. Driver contends that this innate image of divinity was different in Jesus than Moses, of course...but maybe something about being in prayer on the mountain...reflecting on what was soon coming...maybe that divinity spilled out of Jesus then...more brightly than any human had yet seen.

So, Jesus is on this mountain...in shining glory... and Moses and Elijah meet them there...the personification of the law and the prophets. And they are not only there to show that Jesus's work is a continuation of what they proclaimed...Just as we do not hear about Moses on Sinai today just because he and Jesus were both so shiny...

You see, Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah were there on the mountain to talk to Jesus about his departure...about what was coming in Jerusalem.

And here, I owe a debt to another scholar and preacher, Dr. Karoline Lewis, for offering an insight from the Greek text... Because when Elijah and Moses, those

departed and faithful servants, appear to talk with Jesus about his departure... what the Greek says they discuss is his "exodus."

Jesus is not just fulfilling the law of Moses...or the words of Elijah... He is about to embark on his exodus...That is what connects this mountain and Sinai...this moment and that moment centuries ago...and the journey of Lent which about to begin for us. That is why Jesus needs Moses and Elijah to surround him. Jesus is about to cut a new path to liberation...and this time it will lead through a place even more deadly than the Red Sea...with an enemy even more fearsome than Pharaoh and his whole army.

Jesus is about to be pursued by all the powers that would seek to capture and control him and the love and power of God. Jesus is about to share a final meal with his friends...the very meal his ancestors ate as they prepared to flee for their lives in Egypt that night.

And today, his friends don't understand (and we probably don't either)... because they still don't know that the power of God looks like struggle but not domination...The power of God looks like love but not being highly-regarded. The power of God even looks like defeat and death. Maybe it's why Jesus is so frustrated with the disciples right away when they come down the mountain... because he knows how hard it will be for them to follow in the days that are coming when they have not yet understood that they will be living through another Exodus.

Today, the glory of God illuminates the path to freedom...but it is not an easy path. It wasn't when the Israelites fled with Pharaoh's chariots at their heels. And it won't be now. The path of liberation is not an easy one. Make no mistake. If we think it is difficult to look directly into the glory of the mountaintop...we will also know how hard it is to walk in the valley where shadows seem to hide everything glorious.

But God doesn't ever leave us captive and confused. Not in Egypt. Not now. Just like Jesus will not leave the disciples behind as he clears the trail to freedom... Just like God continued to lead the people with Moses in the wilderness. God is going with us now into the valley...into Lent...

People of God, prepare as best you can. Freedom is coming. It will not be easy... It is never easy being free. Because as soon as we start walking the path of freedom, we realize we aren't free until we all are free. As soon as we start walking the path of freedom, we realize that being awake is harder than sleeping. As soon as we start walking the path of freedom, we realize how far out of captivity we may all have yet to go.

And still, there is a pillar of fire leading the way...a glorious Lord bathed in Light...and when we look to our right and to our left...we see how God is restoring us to each other, so we can be strong for the journey, together.

The work of freedom and life stand ahead of us, and the glory of God is lighting the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.