

Sermon – The Edge of Lent
Transfiguration Sunday, March 3, 2019
Scripture – Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 34:29-35. Five times Moses ascends and descends the mountain in the Exodus story and today's reading is his final journey. The Ten Commandments have been given by God, broken by the people, and given again. In God's presence on Mount Sinai Moses' appearance has been changed...transformed reflecting God's glory. God's presence is both an awesome and terrifying experience. Moses becomes more than a messenger of God's law. His shining face symbolizes God's call to the higher ethical standard. Hear now God's word to us on this Transfiguration Sunday.

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant^[a] in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with God, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with God. Amen.

Exodus 34 is an excellent text for Transfiguration Sunday, according to theologian Marion Soards, for two reasons. First, Transfiguration Sunday is a celebration of God's descent into the world, which is exactly what the Old Testament lessons are about. Second, the primary way to communicate such a divine descent in the Bible is through the mythological symbol of the mountain. The vertical structure of the Sinai narrative provides important insight for reading the Gospel lesson where the same symbolism is employed to describe how God in Christ descended into this world and how the disciples (like Moses) were taken to the mountaintop in order to witness the revelation. Our gospel reading is Luke 9:28-36, which follows Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection. Listen for the word of the Lord.

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus^[a] took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake,^[b] they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,^[c] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen;^[d] listen to him!" ³⁶ 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: The Edge of Lent

The Text: ... Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. Luke 9:28

Let us pray: Loving God, thank you for descending into our world to meet us and for inviting us to accompany your Holy and bright presence upon the mountain. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This Tuesday at Presbytery I serendipitously received the gift of a book by the Rev. Dr. Laura Ann Kraus entitled Tuning My Heart. In this book, Dr. Kraus, who is the Director of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Fund, reflects upon the liturgical year in proclamation, poetry, and praise. Her words regarding the transfiguration are woven throughout this sermon.

Lent begins Wednesday, and today, the final Sunday before the solemn observance of that holy season, is called “The Transfiguration of the Lord.” Before we begin our contemplative journey toward the cross in the season of Lent, we pause today in a moment of joy, in a surprise party of astonishment and wonder at the reflective light of God’s transforming presence.

Standing on the edge of Lent, Transfiguration Sunday dares us to consider the possibility of a season of penitence marked as much by joy as by ashes, filled as much with light as with gloom and despair.

The stories of Moses and Jesus on the mountain’s edge reveal how vast is the gulf that separates divine majesty from mere mortality, joy from despair, and the knowledge of God from the human arena, *where we see through a glass, dimly*.

When the law was given to the Hebrew people on their desert journey, Moses alone dared to climb Mount Sinai. As he ascended, the mountain was covered with the glory of the Lord in a cloud and a devouring fire. The people who watched from below were terrified.

When Moses came down the mountain, the marriage of glory and dust was manifest in him. He came back a changed man, though he did not know it. *The skin of his face shone*, the story says, *because he had been talking to God*. Moses received the law, he knew God face to face—he was a man so stripped of the barriers of pretense, so attuned to truth that *his face blushed with divine inspiration*. Shining in the transfigured face of Moses was evidence that the glory of God could peacefully coexist with humanity, but the people could not bear it. So Moses veiled his face—literally covering up the evidence of God and freedom that radiated so visibly from his soul.

The Gospel describes how Peter, John and James went up to the mountain with Jesus, alone, and there, saw him transfigured—covered with glory and shining with light. What this passage does not tell us is that this transformation was precipitated by Jesus’ acknowledgement of his pending death, which he shared with his disciples eight days earlier. Luke’s reference to eight days refers to the resurrection which happened on the first day of the week or the eighth day.

When the disciples ascend to the mountain’s edge to pray with Jesus, they were confused and saddened by the news that Jesus’ life was to be given over to suffering, betrayal, and death. When the moment of transfiguration came, and Jesus was eclipsed with all the power and glory

of God in dazzling white accompanied by the patriarchs of their faith, Moses and Elijah, the disciples received a gift; a confirmation that this One who called them from their fishing boats was indeed God's beloved son. Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain at the edge between this world and the divine foreshadows his resurrection and affirms both the humanity and divinity of Christ.

As the three disciples journeyed down that mountain, they too were changed and understood that they had witnessed the meeting of the temporal and the eternal, of the human and divine. They were both astonished and terrified. They also understood that even the blessing and the presence of God's glory cannot save Jesus from the mortality he embraced when he joined us in our humanity. Jesus' human death and the way he died is intimately connected with his divine glory.

As Dr. Kraus concludes: *Transfiguration is not a great escape -- a way out of the troubles of the world to day-trip in the glory with God, free from our responsibilities. Nor is the transfiguration only for the divine among us, too holy and ethereal for mere mortals to apprehend. Transfiguration is, rather, the place where two worlds meet: incarnation. All the possibilities of God embodied in the lives of people who, step by step and choice by choice, work their way up the mountain into some kind of enlightenment. It is difficult and diligent work: and it is also the place where the glory of God shines.* (Tuning My Heart, pg. 67)

We gather on this Transfiguration Sunday to celebrate the glory of God shining in our very human lives and to welcome new members, brothers and sisters in Christ, who join us on our way up the mountain, step by step and choice by choice.

As we stand on the edge of Lent, let us pause in a moment of joy, light, and astonishment. Amen.