

## **Luke 9:28-43**

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.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly 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. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While 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. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.\*

## **Back to Work** - February 27, 2022

*Luke 9:28-43*

I don't know about you, but I have rarely encountered God in a way that was unmistakable. I mean, when we hear the words, "Encountering God," we may think of hearing voices, being blinded by overwhelming lights, or witnessing or experiencing otherwise inexplicable events. From the Bible we might recall Moses and the Burning Bush, Elijah being taken to heaven in a Chariot of Fire, and, of course, the subject of today's lesson, Jesus' Transfiguration.

Recall what happens: Jesus ascends a mountain to pray. With him are three of his most devoted followers, Peter, John, and James. The disciples had no idea what was about to happen and to their astonishment they saw Jesus transformed from the human they knew into something beyond description. They saw a white, shining, radiant being, talking with Moses and Elijah. So overwhelmed by the sight, Peter could only blurt out, "Let's build dwellings where the three of you can stay." And then, topping it all, was a voice saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Needless to say, none of us here have ever experienced anything of such intensity. Even if you have encountered God in some inexplicable way, it could not compare to the sheer awe-someness of the Transfiguration.

Now in our scientific, fact-proof laden world, it can be easy to dismiss the Transfiguration of Jesus as a mere fantasy, a dream, a hallucination. If, in our modern way of thinking, we accept the Transfiguration story as real, then it opens the floodgates to every bizarre encounter people have reported with God not just in the Bible, but for the past 2000 years. In other words, if the Transfiguration is real, how can we possibly distinguish between genuine encounters with God and those based on wishful thinking?

However, what is equally telling about the Transfiguration story, and what makes it real is not just the encounter itself, but also what happens afterwards. Let's dig in.

The Transfiguration of Jesus describes his meeting with Moses and Elijah, two of the most celebrated people in scripture. Think about what each represents. First, there is Moses. If we know anything about the Bible, we know Moses is the one chosen by God to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert, and to the doorstep of the promised land of Israel. Along the way, Moses brought his people the Ten Commandments and laws which formed the foundation of how Israelites were to treat God, each other, and themselves. Moses is the symbol of the Law, the Law that defined and still defines who the Jewish people are.

Indeed as Christians, we are bound to the Law of Moses. Jesus often stated that his mission on earth was to fulfill the Law. Jesus came to show us that the heart of everything he did and said was his command that we love each other. If you look at the Law of Moses, underlying all of it is a fervent desire that we love each other and God. What are the Ten Commandments about? They each focus on how we human beings should be loving God and loving each other.

Who, then, is Elijah, the other one who appeared to Jesus? Elijah is considered Israel's greatest prophet. Who were the prophets? No, they weren't fortune tellers. They weren't predictors of the future. No, the prophets were those called by God to interpret the Law of Moses to the rulers of Israel and the people of Israel. The prophets functioned as God's mirror, showing the people the extent to which they had deviated from God's Law. Elijah and other prophets worked to remind the people that they had made an agreement with God, embedded in the Ten Commandments. Their agreement, or covenant, was very clear: If the people violated God's Law, then God would punish Israel.

Moses, in short, brought the Law to Israel. Elijah explained the Law to Israel. Jesus spoke of himself as the one who both lived the Law the way God intended and proclaimed what the Law meant for the people. Jesus is the culmination of the Law, symbolized by Moses and the Prophets, symbolized by Elijah. It makes perfect sense that the three be linked together. It makes perfect sense that a voice was heard demanding that people listen to Jesus because everything he did was in accordance with what Moses gave and what Elijah explained. If you want to know how God intends for the world to function, look at Jesus, his life, and his teachings.

Sometimes the problem with religion is that we can get so absorbed by the more mysterious and magical-sounding parts that we forget that our faith journey is not about where we are going, but what we are doing right now. Many Christians today are no different from millions of their predecessors across the centuries in that they are focused on "the rapture," "the end of the world," and "the judgement day." They are so focused on the end times that they ignore the condition of the world around us. Some see no connection between religious faith and what is happening out there.

But don't let the "bells and whistles" of the Transfiguration event distract you, even as they did distract Peter, John, and James. Contrary to what they thought, contrary to what some modern Christians feel, the Transfiguration of Jesus is not the highlight of his earthly ministry. Rather, the Transfiguration points us not toward heaven but back to earth.

What good, what good, friends is seeing the glory of the Lord if it means nothing to regular people? For that matter, what good, do our beautiful church buildings and elaborate worship services mean if they don't uplift those of us who are here and in turn inspire us to uplift others?

No, friends, as beautiful and terrifying as the Transfiguration must have been to the disciples, the real purpose of the event was to confirm once and for all that Jesus' ministry was decidedly not about power and mountaintop experiences. Rather, Jesus was all about getting off the mountain and mixing it up with the regular people on the ground. Jesus came into this world to act for the least, the last, and the lost and friends, if we claim to be his followers, so should we. If we as the church are not dedicating ourselves, like Jesus, to the needs of regular people, then we have failed as Christ's church and the church deserves to die.

What did Jesus do after the Transfiguration event? Did he stay on his mountaintop and bask in the glory of God? No. Instead, Jesus leaves the lights, sounds, and magnificence of his mountaintop experience behind and goes back down the mountain to be with the people. Moses brought the Law down from Mt. Sinai to guide and define the Jewish people. Elijah, like Jesus, often found himself in lonely, abandoned places from which he would emerge and guide the people.

All this religion stuff is pointless unless it is actively changing people for the better. Jesus went up the mountain where he encountered God. But most importantly, Jesus went back down the mountain recharged and refreshed in order to resume his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. In other words, Jesus went Back to Work.

It is easy, very easy, to be caught up in praise, achievement, titles, and wealth. It is very easy after receiving praise, honor, degrees, status, to suddenly consider ourselves to be above the needs and concerns of the average world. After all, you don't see many corporate CEO's volunteering to serve at soup kitchens. I know few school superintendents or school principals who actually interact deeply with the children they are supposed to serve. Time and again, we hear stories of those ranging from upper class to the super rich who haven't a clue how most people live. I wonder how much most Americans really know about the rest of the world, or even about people living in Camden, Trenton, or Philadelphia?

I fear that many of the trappings of organized religion may demonstrate how disconnected the church is from the realities of many people. The beauty of church buildings like ours, the gorgeous windows, the silver and gold that adorn the objects we use in worship — all these can create the idea the church is more concerned with looking good to the world instead of looking to the good of the world.

The Transfiguration clearly demonstrates that Jesus did not care about celebrating his glory. When Peter was talking about building dwellings for him and Moses and Elijah, Jesus simply ignored him. Yes, the Transfiguration of Jesus is an important event in that it affirms Jesus' role in being the advocate for the Law and reminding Israel of what God expects of them. But that was already clearly obvious from Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. The Transfiguration is merely icing on the cake of Jesus' ministry and Jesus proves this by descending from the mountain and immersing himself into the lives and needs of the people.

The point of the Transfiguration is where Jesus went, we should also go. The world is teetering on disaster in so many ways. Who knows how the war in Ukraine will play out? I'm sure there will be all kinds of unexpected consequences we can't possibly predict. We are immersed in climate change which is causing increasingly bizarre weather all over the world. Who knows how elections will turn out? Who knows how the mounting divisions in our nation will affect our future? We simply don't know but what we cannot forget is that Jesus did not avoid the problems facing the people but did what he could, involving himself in their daily lives and making a difference however he could.

The point is that each one of us has the power to get involved. The Transfiguration is about action taking precedence over honor. This week we begin the season of Lent, the time of preparation for Jesus' suffering and death which lead, of course, to his triumphant resurrection.

However, I fear that because we live in the post-resurrection realm of the risen Lord, it is too easy to forget his daily ministry, his daily interactions with regular folks like us. The glory of the Transfiguration can blind us, just as it blinded the disciples. It can blind us to the fact that our faith is useless without our taking the time to reflect, pray, and ask God for what we should be doing in the world.

Every one of our calls is different because we are all unique creations. But we all do have gifts, talents, and abilities we can share with the world. If we say we follow Jesus, then serving God is the only thing we should be concerned about: not power, not money, not glory.

The Transfiguration signals the turning point where Jesus did all he could to heal and preach and teach even as he was moving closer and closer and closer to Jerusalem, his suffering and his crucifixion.

In the weeks ahead I urge you set aside time to pray and ask God how you can best serve God and each other. In the weeks ahead, I have a feeling we are all going to be very, very busy.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.