

Transfiguration of Our Lord (February 27, 2022) Text: All Lessons

“From Vision to Ministry”

We call it fog. Actually your local meteorologist will tell you it is a cloud that has settled on the surface. In a novel I read recently the author wrote about how Interstate Route 5 in California can suddenly turn into a dangerous place when the fog moves in so densely that twenty- and thirty-car pile-ups are not an uncommon result.

On several mornings when I was making my many trips to Ashland (both as student and then as adjunct faculty) I encountered a brief fog like that on I-271 on the bridge that crosses over the Cuyahoga River. The fog becomes the more difficult if the sun is shining on it or through it; it becomes almost blinding. When we can't see where you're going, it is natural to be fearful and anxious.

Such a cloud settled on the mountaintop where Jesus was with Peter, James, and John. Luke tells us this cloud ***“overshadowed them”*** (ἐπεσκίαζεν αὐτούς *epeskialen autous*). Matthew, Mark and Luke use this verb in their accounts of the Transfiguration; Luke uses it one other time, when the archangel announces the birth of the Messiah to Mary by telling her, ***“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you ...”*** Those are the only times in the New Testament this word appears.

In the Old Testament, this cloud has a name — the Shekinah, the presence or “dwelling” of God. God's presence filled the tabernacle in the time of wilderness wandering; it filled the temple in Isaiah's vision; it fully encompassed Mt. Sinai (part of today's First Lesson) as the Law was delivered to Moses.

Clouds do not assault; they cover, but in this case with a brilliance that displayed the very glory of God. The disciples, understandably, were “terrified” (φοβήθω *phobaytho* from which we get the word “phobia”). I suspect that fear was not lessened by the voice that spoke to them (we'll come back to that).

What must it be like to be in the presence of God's glory?

When Moses, we are told in today's First Lesson, had come out of such a cloud, "***the skin of his face shone,***" such that the leaders "***were afraid to come near him***" (so we have to think that this was more than a just bad sunburn). There was a reflection of God's glory on his face, and the leaders recognized this. Plainly, being in the presence God's glory is reflected by those who experience it.

Which is precisely what St. Paul tells us in today's Second Lesson: ". . . ***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 . . .***" If you recall, when Moses asked to see God, he was told that to look directly onto the glory of God would be so overwhelming that it would kill Moses. So Moses was allowed to see the Lord's back as he passed by Moses.

Paul is making the case that the Incarnation is the Shekinah of God — only as seen in a mirror (because we still cannot confront the full glory of God and survive). Luther picks up on this by insisting that God has, throughout history, worn masks, not to deceive us, but to draw near to us without harm. The greatest mask, the most important one, Luther argued, was the Incarnation.

Paul pushes on to say that "***this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.***" New Testament Professor, Carla Works, asks an important question at this point: "*Given what is revealed about the Corinthians in this letter . . . has the Corinthian church really been transformed by God's glory?*" She goes on to point out: "*These believers have caused great heartache to the apostle and to one another. Paul admits to a previous painful visit and a tearful letter. Yet, the apostle is certain that the church's continued existence, in spite of itself, is a sign that God is at work within it.*"

Which raises for us a similar question: "*Can St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Streetsboro, Ohio really be said to have been transformed by God's glory?*" The answer to that is, most assuredly, "***Yes!***" Like the

church at Corinth in Paul's day, we may be able to identify all manner of examples of how we do not reflect that glory — to one another or to our community — still, the glory is present ... but it is masked.

So, what evidence is there to suggest this transformation? It is the splendor of Christ that is found in forgiveness . . . it is, in short, the Gospel — the Good News that, no matter how far from grace we may wander or even rebel, God's grace is shining on us. We are reminded of that again this morning as we hear the words of absolution [and especially as we come to share the Eucharist].

Having announced to the Corinthians that they ***“are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another”*** Paul jumps right into what they should be doing. Whenever you encounter the word “therefore” in the letters of St. Paul, you know a transition is being made from proclamation to instruction, moving from what God has done to what we are then to do in response. Here the message is to forsake all that keeps you wandering away from the Gospel so that you can let your life become a shining beacon that draws people to Christ.

Today's Gospel gives us some help on this. First, note why Jesus and the three disciples went up the mountain to do — they went there to pray. When you carve out time and place for prayer, you can expect to encounter God's glory. Certainly you can pray “on the fly” . . . indeed every moment of every day is an appropriate time for prayer: in your car, at your desk, in the locker room, at the grocery store, standing in line at (well just about anyplace you have to stand in line), at your bedside, at the meal table, wherever that may be.

But establishing *a* place . . . a niche in your home, a corner of the basement, the sofa in the living room . . . and setting aside time (more than two or three minutes . . . who knows, you might work up to several hours) . . . doing place and time for prayer positions you to encounter the Lord in a deeper, more powerful manner.

On this occasion, prayer opened Jesus and Peter, James, and John to a

special encounter. Jesus starts to glow (how would you have reacted to that?!). Moses and Elijah appear (how did they know who it was, they certainly were not wearing photo I.D.'s?). Jesus is engaged in conversation (apparently He did know who they were)...a conversation about His, (that is Jesus') "departure" (Greek ἔξοδος exodos). Scholars are divided on the nuances of the use of this word; but all agree that it has to do with Jesus' impending Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

I would emphasize this: the presence of Moses underscores that, as the Exodus from Egypt was the great salvation event of the Old Testament, what Jesus was about to do would be the greater salvation event of the New Testament.

Just as we will witness in the Garden of Gethsemane before Jesus' arrest, the three almost sleep through this event, as well. But they are awake enough so that Peter, who often does not know what to say, or says it all discombobulated, manages to blurt out "*Booths! We gotta build booths!*" The Greek word is σκηνᾶς (skaynas) and can mean tents, booths, shrines, lean-tos, or any of a dozen other small structures. Luke is quick to point out that Peter said this, "*not knowing what he said.*"

I am so grateful for Peter; just reading about his many blusters and blunders gives me hope.

But then comes the main event (as if things weren't already in the power zone).

The cloud overshadows them and the voice speaks, "***This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!***" At His Baptism, a voice had declared Jesus to be "the Beloved" — here He is identified as ἐκλελεγμένος (eklelegmenos): "the one having been called out or forth" — it is rooted in the same word that would later become the term for the church: ἐκκλησία (ekklyasia). This word at this moment sets us up to understand the importance and impact of all that Jesus will endure at Jerusalem in his ἔξοδος — for this He is the Chosen One, in Hebrew, Messiah.

So, Peter James, John and Jesus have had a mountaintop experience . . .or was it? Yes, it was on a mountain, but was it the exhilarating experience we associate with that term? In part it was . . . glory was revealed, Jesus was dazzling, the voice of God came; but in part there was also focus on impending suffering and death. There is a dark undercurrent at work on this mountain, and it is why Peter's booths will never be built . . . there is far too much to do to stay there.

So they come down, and Luke informs us ***“they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”*** That seems a tad unfair to the other disciples, because I can just hear them asking, *“Whadja do? Whadja see? D’ja hear anything? Come on, give. What happened?”* They may have kept silence, but I can easily imagine that the others saw something in them that hadn't been there before.

But what? A feeling of euphoria for what had transpired? or A feeling of impending doom for what they heard was about to take place?

This event took place just eight days after Peter confesses Jesus as Lord, and Jesus taught them that this meant: ***“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”*** (Luke 9:22) So talk of death is always around from this moment on.

On top of that, the next day they are confronted with a problem. I am so pleased that those who formed the Lectionary chose to include these verses in today's reading.

Out of a crowd a man yells for help. It's the kind of help we have seen Jesus often provide. A boy is controlled by an evil spirit; the disciples tried but could not get rid of the spirit. The spirit convulses the boy right in front of Jesus and Jesus shuts it down, heals the boy, and returns him to his father.

Is this an interruption to the narrative? No, it is the reason for us to pay attention to what Jesus is doing. The voice in the cloud had said, ***“Listen to him.”*** Evil spirits do just that. Had the disciples? Do we?

Taken out of context, Jesus' reaction seems a little over the top, "***You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?***" But when you know the context, you can understand why Jesus is so upset.

Just before the mountaintop event, Luke wrote: "***... Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.***" (9:1-2) And they did it! It is hard sometimes for us to recognize what God can do in us.

The first year of my doctoral program, all the students were required to serve as Caregivers for the Formational Prayer Seminar. The night before the event, Dr. Wardle told us, "*People who pay \$450 to attend a seminar do not want to hear you say, 'I'm not sure of what I'm doing.'*" But I didn't know what I was doing, but I also didn't know what God was doing until He did it. The people in my group actually found some healing care and relief from the hand of God, and I got to sit in the front row while He was doing it.

I now know that I can serve as a Caregiver (indeed, I am now considered a Senior Caregiver), and I still get to sit in the front row while God does what He alone can do. That first time, however, I fear that I belonged to that "***faithless and perverse generation***" — very untrusting, anxious, fearful.

But here's the Good News: In spite of me, Jesus came through. In spite of the disciples, Jesus healed the boy. In spite of our reticence, resistance, refusal, or reluctance, Jesus acts. He so wants us to be on the journey with Him. He so wants us to experience the power of His presence and grace at work through us.

For every vision, there will be time for corresponding ministry. We must come down from every mountaintop to be with Jesus as He meets people in the midst of their pain, their misery, their struggles, their distress. The visions we are privileged to experience are there so that we might be

reassured who it is who calls us, whose voice to which we hearken, whose power we exercise. All that we experience in wonder before the Lord comes down to this: He is the Chosen, not we. We need to listen to Him. That means that we have to quiet out the world, the family, the workload, the budget, and especially our own voices and sit with Him just to listen . . . not to talk, or ask, or complain . . . but just to be in His presence and listen . . . listen . . . listen.

I am convinced that what you hear will be something like this: *“You’ve shown me what you can do. Would you now like to see what I can do?”*
Amen.