

Transfiguration Sunday

Transfigured/Transformed

Exodus 24:12-18, 34:29-35

24:12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 24:13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 24:14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

24:15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

24:16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.

24:17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

24:18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

34:29 Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. 30 So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33 And 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 Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. 35 And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him.

Transfigured/Transformed

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1: 1-4)

There is something about the light of God that gets into us, that changes us, that shines for others to see.

In his closing sermon here, Wayne spoke from Phil 2:12-15 that starts with “while we are apart, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” and ends with “shine as lights in the world.”

I’m sure it was tempting to preach on continuing to work out your salvation but he knew that it was a better day to settle on how you, as people of God, “shine as lights in the world.”

And it’s funny that Joan then spoke the next week of being the “salt of the earth and light of the world” and then Mark spoke last Sunday of the abundant life – a life filled with the light of Jesus’ gift to humanity, and here I am talking again about the light of God.

We certainly didn’t plan this. Wayne preached a goodbye sermon, Joan a press-on sermon, Mark a celebration of God’s gifts sermon and I’m preaching a “why we are here” sermon. Yet, we all are talking about God’s light, that shines for others to see.

People are creative, and complicated. We are all fixers and optimizers in everything we do.

Give a 2-year-old some toys, he/she will line them up, categorize them, play with the blue ones first or establish some other pattern. Give anyone a simple task and they will optimize it to be done better or faster or more simply.

Packing a bag to travel is a good example, we might claim that we “just throw some things in a bag and go” but in reality, it’s a constant process of considering, planning, doing, and verification. Now, I’m not OCD but, a few weeks ago, while packing for a trip, I needed to charge my razor. I noted that in just plugging in the razor I took the time to ensure the plug was pointing toward the bag I would pack

the charged razor in the next morning. A silly thing, saving no real time or making any real ease but an optimization none the less.

And, as I was preparing this sermon, I found myself walking down the same well-worn path that thousands of others who have looked at these scenes have walked, through the millennia. We compare and contrast, we're all optimizers.

These 2 passages, one from Exodus, one Matthew. There were mountains. With Moses it was Mt. Sinai near the southern border with Egypt. With Jesus and the disciples, it was Mt. Hermon on the Syrian border, 100 miles or so North of Sinai. Moses prepared Aaron and Hur to lead the people and he took his assistant Joshua, with him. Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him.

There was a cloud on both mountains, inside of which God worked.

There was Moses. There was Jesus, there was God.

Moses' people heard God's thunder and in fear stayed well clear of the place Moses went. When the disciples heard God speak, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. And there was the light of God; Moses' face shone with God's glory, Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. It's like the same scene echoed *1200 years apart*.

In our first reading, a lot happens between Exodus 24 and 34 that we didn't read. Moses brought down the tablets with the 10 commandments, the law, carved into them and the people rejected the law by rejecting Moses and his mission to speak for God - to them and to God for them.

God had told the Hebrew nation that they were his people and he was their God. He had taken them from the bondage of Egypt and set them on a path to the promised land.

But they had rejected their leader and prophet, Moses and God and the "my people/our God relationship.

They instead construct their own god from their jewelry, from their gold.

The people had Moses' brother Aaron make an idol of a calf from their idols of gold jewelry and they declared to the nation: "this is your god, that brought you up out of Egypt."

Moses, their spiritual leader, left them and they lost their way. But God wasn't fooled, He knew what they had done and was going to destroy them. Somehow Moses managed to get God to relent and the nation learned something important about God; that even when they turned away, they as God's people remained God's people.

Even so, when Moses came down and saw all of this, he was mad! He smashed the tablets of the law on the ground and burned the golden calf and ground it to dust and made all the people drink the dust of the golden idol in water.

So Moses went back up Mount Sinai again and spent another 40 days with God and returned with the law on new tablets. And when Moses returned this second time from the mountain, he was different. God had passed by Moses and he saw the Lord and was changed by it. The skin of his face shone with the light of God, and that light the people feared.

Now - we should not fixate it too quickly on the mountaintop experience of Moses somehow comparing it to our own lives. This is not a story about us but about the divinity of God who is always with us.

Any substitute teachers here? (Don't want to get in hot water but...)

A teacher with a book - but without a plan - really is not one who could do their best as a teacher.

And, a leader without a plan and without vision is not a leader.

Moses was both a teacher and a leader and God gave Moses both the plan and a vision that took his people to the promised land and into history, all the way to the gospels in the New Testament.

This is the mountaintop experience of Gods glory on display that maps all the way to the mountaintop experience of Jesus and his divinity on display.¹

Our NT passage is from Chapter 17 of Matthew but the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is the climax of a series of encounters between Jesus and his disciples at

¹ Pastoral Perspective, 434

Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Herman that starts in Chapter 16, before our passage today.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Matthew uses the phrase Son of Man 29 times in his gospel, most of which are spoken by Jesus himself, 12 times before the scene. It's exceedingly clear that when Jesus says the Son of Man is speaking of himself.

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 16:20 Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Then Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Now, you remember that right about then, Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that he would die, and then Jesus rebuked Peter saying "Get behind me satan" for having merely human concerns in mind instead of the concerns of God. Not a pretty scene for Peter.

Yet, Jesus still takes Peter with him up Mount Herman with him.

It's almost like any day on the job for the new guys in the office. The boss says: I have a meeting to get to, you guys should come along; learn a bit about the family business, teach you the ropes as it were. Peter, James and John were about to learn about Jesus in a whole new way. It must have been surreal, and powerful.

Matthew 17:1-9

17:1 Six days later (after the scene in Caesarea Philippi), Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

17:2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

17:3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

17:4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

17:5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

17:6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

17:7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

17:8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

17:9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Word of the Lord – Thanks be to God.

How would you respond? You are standing on the side of a mountain with your friends and suddenly Moses and Elijah are there. There is a bright cloud that overshadows you all, your teachers face shines like the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, God's voice speaks, and the experience drives you to the ground in fear. What do you say or think then?

We learn better about people we think we know, when we experience their life with them.

Secrets are observed, the story of their lives becomes rich and vivid. You say: "I never knew that about you".

The disciples had spent 2 ½ years with Jesus and they were coming around quickly now to who he was. They also knew of the story of Moses and how his face shown with God's glory.

The transfiguration affirmed Jesus' divinity for them.

6 days before, Peter had said it clearly; "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Could there now be any doubt?

It is important to know who you are following.² The Hebrew nation at the foot of Mount Sinai was fearful of the future in the desert ahead; they wanted to go back to the familiarity and certainty of Egypt. The disciples on the mountain, having just heard Jesus tell them that he would soon die in Jerusalem wanted to find some other path, wanted to go back to the way things were when Jesus was the teacher and they were the students.

² Erica Wood, Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, ED David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year A, vol. 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), *Homiletical Perspective*, 435.

Both the Exodus story and the Matthew story speak of the experience of the people with a God they barely knew. But they are both pivotal moments where Moses and Jesus showed the face of God to the people who followed them. This is the giving of the law to a people finally learning to say clearly “we are following God”.

And it’s the story of the certification of Jesus divinity, the transformation of from teacher to Christ; and the disciples who were clearly saying “we are following God, the Messiah”.

So, this brings us to our question of the day. Do you know who you are following? Are you trying to follow the god (small g) you barely know or God, who knows you intimately? The god who leaves you walking in your wilderness or God, who touches you in a time of fear and says “Get up, do not be afraid”?

Next week we start walking into Lent, and Lent is about facing the wilderness – the unknown. When facing the Lenten journey, we know we are heading to a place of both sadness and victory but we can’t get to the victory without walking through the difficult path ahead. The text in Exodus and Matthew both lead to the beginning of a difficult journey, fraught with danger, with an unknown wilderness ahead.

Our lives are constantly faced with an unknown wilderness. We are often tempted to let fear overwhelm, not just our emotions, but the very foundations of our faith. Do we panic and begin to worship other, more instantly gratifying gods, like at the foot of Mount Sinai, or do we lean in, into the faith and the strength that God demands? “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; **listen to him!**”

I say without doubt, we lean in, we seek the light that God gives to us through Jesus and let that light shine for everyone to see.

Moses and Jesus were transfigured on a mountain and we are transformed by their experiences, by their power, by our history as a saved people, and by God’s saving grace and infinite mercy.

Okay, so, all you optimizers out there, all y’all, how shall we optimize our lives to have more of God’s light in them?

How do we optimize our lives to have them bathed in the true light of God?

I think, we seek, the mountain of God and the light of God on it, that already lives inside us.

Everything we do that furthers the light of God in us, brings more light. Be it learning this book, praying these prayers, singing these songs, loving these people, serving those people, or breaking bread with someone in need – God’s light shines through.

But it’s important to know who you follow so others can know who leads you. God seeks us and then God keeps us.

I was with a man recently who knew God in his life as a younger adult but now he was facing the end of his time and he said he wasn’t certain in his faith, of God’s light in him. We talked of many things but mostly of the light that God brought into his life and 2 pivotal verses that ring true for our lives:

Peters words: “...(The Lord) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

and Jesus’ assertion that “... this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of those He has given Me...” (John 6:39)

The point is, God seeks us all and once we are His, we are always his.

Alistair Begg: Martyn Lloyd-Jones: An American doing a Scotsman doing a Welsh accent: *When you’re in you’re in.*

Once we are Gods, we are always his.

It’s Such a mystery, that God, who can do anything, would rely on us to be his light in the world. That we are entrusted, in fact, expected, to be God’s light in the world, shining on others as God’s light to everyone.

We who “shine as lights in the world.”

We who are “salt of the earth and light of the world”

We who live “a life filled with the light of Jesus”

And we who are transformed by the light of God in us.

Let us live into that light and pass it on.

Amen