



The Transfiguration of Our Lord: Luke 9:28-36*

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The transfiguration text is not an easy one. What makes it even more difficult for the preacher is that it occurs every year at the end of the Epiphany Season, from Matthew, then Mark, and now from Luke. After a few years in the parish we all wonder what we can say about the text that we have not said many times already.

It was our hope, therefore, that we could suggest for you readers a fresh way of seeing this text and preaching on it.

I. THE SETTING OF THE TEXT IN THE SCRIPTURES

This appearance of Jesus with Elijah and Moses triggers an immediate response from anyone familiar with the Old Testament, whether it be a first-century or a contemporary listener. Not only are these two great prophets, but both are part of theophany stories where they stand in the very presence of God. So to anyone who knows this tradition, the Transfiguration text would be reminiscent of these theophany accounts.

More importantly, both Moses and Elijah are part of Israel's eschatological hopes. In his closing address to the Israelites Moses looks to the future and says to his people, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you And the Lord said to me, 'They have rightly said all that they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren'" (Deut 18:15-18). The closing verses of the Old Testament speak of Elijah coming again: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes..." (Malachi 4:5).

The imagery in the Transfiguration text is typical of both theophany and eschatological stories—going up the mountain, light, dazzling raiment, cloud, the voice of God, etc. An early Christian hearing the Transfiguration text would immediately think, "No doubt, this Jesus stands at the end of time!" This is precisely the hope expressed by Peter in one of his first sermons, when he reminds his listeners of Deuteronomy 18 as he speaks of Jesus:

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But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled....Moses said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him in

whatever he tells you....” And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers.... (Acts 3:18-25)

Before his martyrdom Stephen reviews the history of Israel (Acts 7:30-53), including God’s appearance to Moses and Moses’ words from Deuteronomy 18. He concludes by proclaiming that these events all pointed to Jesus. It is Jesus who brings this prophetic hope to a climax at the end of time.

Even the enigmatic reference to the “booths” which Peter wanted to build may well remind those familiar with the Old Testament that in his vision of the final, triumphant reign of God the prophet Zechariah saw the feast of the booths as a part of the final kingdom (Zech 14:18).

From this background, therefore, Jewish listeners would hear the Transfiguration story as a magnificent testimony that Jesus was the culmination of the prophetic tradition, a part of the manifestation and revelation of God who was part of the end of history.

II. THE SETTING OF THE TEXT IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The sequence of the events surrounding the Transfiguration is basically the same in Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

- the feeding of the 5000, a stupendous miracle
- Jesus’ inquiry to the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” [note how Elijah is one of the answers, looking toward the Transfiguration!] and “Who do you say I am?”
- a foretelling of Jesus’ suffering to come
- a talk about discipleship and cross-bearing .the Transfiguration
- healing the epileptic
- another foretelling of Jesus’ suffering

In this sequence the Transfiguration comes strategically at the time of Jesus’ greatest popularity, yet also when the first notes of suffering are beginning to sound.

III. THE SETTING OF THE TEXT IN THE PERICOPES

In the three-year lectionary texts for Transfiguration, Series C gets the leftovers. The most fitting Old Testament texts would be the theophany accounts with Moses (Exodus 24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2), but they have already been used, although not as suitably, for the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, Series B. Another related Old Testament text would be Isaiah 42:1, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights,” partially quoted in Luke 9:35. But, as one might expect, that is the Old Testament text for the First Sunday of Epiphany, the Baptism of Our Lord, in all three series. So for the Transfiguration, Series C, Deuteronomy 34:1-12 is selected, which at least does remind us that Moses went up the mountain to see the promised land and that “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face....”

In the Epistles, 1 Peter 1:16-19 recounts the Transfiguration, and that is the Second Lesson for Series A. The Second Lesson for Series B is a reference to God’s appearance to

Moses in 2 Corinthians 3:12ff., leaving us this year with the remainder of that story in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6.

The most suitable psalm for the day is Psalm 2, which is quoted both here and in Jesus' Baptism—"You are my son, today I have begotten you"—but that psalm was already used in Series A. That leaves us with Psalm 99, which at least does mention God's theophany to Moses in the pillar of cloud.

So we will not receive as much assistance from the other texts as we will next year or the year following. But there is plenty in the text itself to occupy us.

IV. THE SETTING OF THE TRANSFIGURATION IN THE CHURCH YEAR

The Transfiguration closes the season of Epiphany—the season of “manifestation, showing forth, making clear”—the bridge between Christmas and Lent.

Epiphany begins with the appearance of the wise men. The first to worship the newborn Jesus were the local folks, the shepherds, who came down from the hillside at the bidding of the angels. Then came the majestic procession from a long distance, the Magi who saw the promise in the stars and crossed the desert to pay homage to the newly born King of the Jews.

The appearance of the wise men, a colorful drama dearly loved in Christmas pageants, is indeed an epiphany. Who in that little village of Bethlehem was not awestruck to see these august visitors, and who was not astounded to learn that they came to see the infant son of a visiting carpenter from Nazareth? *That* was an epiphany!

Of course we seldom observe the Day of Epiphany, since it does not often fall on Sunday. But we do observe the First Sunday after the Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord, with a Gospel lesson which picks up one of the Transfiguration verses (Psalm 2:7) and combines it with Isaiah 42:1, as the voice of God speaks, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).

Now at the other end of the season comes another astonishing epiphany scene—Jesus being joined in glory by Elijah and Moses.

Both stories are a “showing forth,” describing who Jesus truly is and will be. The Transfiguration is indeed a fitting end to the season.

Of course it is also the gateway to Lent. We have already heard Lenten rumblings as Jesus spoke of his sufferings soon to come. Furthermore, as pastors, we are psychologically in Lent by now, since we have already been planning our Lenten services.

V. A SERMON FOR TRANSFIGURATION

The problem with Transfiguration is that we jump the gun and start Lent already, rather than wait for Ash Wednesday.

Haven't you done this? How often do we preach on the Transfiguration just this way:

It was truly a mountain-top experience that day. Peter and the others wanted it to last forever; they even wanted to build three booths, so people could come up and see Jesus, Elijah, and Moses for themselves.

must come off the mountain and resume our daily life, where there is often suffering.

I have preached that sermon many times. It is surely a valid point to make. Yet it tends to suggest that faith is an emotional shot-in-the-arm, and we need to realize it is far more than that. There are two problems with that sermon.

1. It shifts the focus from what is happening with Jesus to what is happening inside Peter. In our attempt to make biblical texts relevant we often resort to “psychologizing” a text by focusing on its effect on one’s soul. Now a text well preached will probe deeply into our souls. But the focus of the sermon should be on the text’s main point, which in this case is Jesus transfigured. Though a sermon will have a profound impact on our life, mind, and soul, to focus the Transfiguration text on the impossibility of living constantly on mountain tops is to miss the true point of this text (even if it does offer good pastoral advice).

The fact that Peter did make his misguided suggestion about booths and that it was not accepted does make that aspect a legitimate topic in a sermon. With careful work, a preacher could use it properly and well; but it must be subordinated to the story of Jesus’ glory.

2. The second problem with this approach is that it jumps the gun into Lent. The time for suffering is ahead, and it will be a long time. Easter is along way from Ash Wednesday, so why the rush to get the disciples off the mountain by noon on Transfiguration Sunday? They will be back on level ground by the following Wednesday when Lent begins. This year, we suggest letting the congregation stay up there on the mountain, at least for this Sunday!

I remember I once titled a Transfiguration sermon “A Glimpse of Glory.” That is what this text gives us. This glimpse of glory is strategically placed for the disciples, because they are on a high following the feeding of the 5000 and Peter’s acknowledgment that Jesus is the Christ. Darker days are soon to come, and this glimpse of glory will buoy them up when everything begins to collapse around them. The thrust of the text is not that we need to come back down to earth after experiencing the mountain, but that we need to keep that glimpse of Jesus’ glory always with us. Its fullness is in the future, but the fact that we saw it is enough for now.

In preaching on an eschatological note, I like to point out how we often peek at the end of a book we are reading to see how the story comes out. For some people that might spoil everything (as in detective stories, where knowing “who dunnit” removes all the tension). But for most people a peek at the end gives the story even more meaning. Think of times when you have read something a second time, and you have said, “Aha!”—understanding much better the sense and meaning of things now that you know how the story will end.

Remember the third act of Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*? The first two acts do not make any sense until you know what is in the third act. The story is about two families in Grover’s Corners, a little town in New Hampshire at about the beginning of the century. In the first act, the parents have a hard time getting the children up and off to school, as all parents have. The children grow up playing with each other, as all children do. In the second act, Emily

Webb and George Gibbs get married, as thousands of couples do every year. It is all so ordinary one wonders why we pay to see it on stage, since we live it every day. Then the third act opens with Emily arriving at the cemetery. She has died, and as she watches her husband grieving, she

wishes she could go back again. She is granted her wish and returns to her twelfth birthday. As she relives that day, both as a participant and as a spectator, she realizes how she took all that everyday life for granted. This time she wishes her mother would stop the usual breakfast preparations to talk with her and that other people would pause to reflect how precious life is. But they do not. They all continue with their daily routines. After just a few minutes Emily cannot stand it any longer and returns to the cemetery, aware finally of how precious the gift of life is.

That's how eschatology works. Knowing the end of the story does not remove us from the drama of the present. Contrary to the thought and practice of many Christians, Christian eschatology is not escapist. We do not forget this world in order to focus on the next. Jesus was not transfigured so that the disciples would not notice the events around them. The Transfiguration would not remove the pain and suffering ahead of them. But that glimpse of glory would stay with them always, particularly in the weeks which were to come.

Jesus was also not transfigured so that he would hurry them off the mountain as quickly as possible. That is not the main point of the story. Besides, such letdowns happen inevitably without preachers urging them upon us.

The Second Lesson is not often helpful in preaching on the Gospel. In the lectionary, the Old Testament texts are paired with the Gospels, so they usually fit better. However, despite the fact that at first glance all the best secondary texts for this Sunday appear to be used up in Series A and B, another look at this Sunday's Second Lesson reveals how splendidly it fits with the main theme of the Gospel.

Last year's Second Lesson (2 Cor 3:12-4:2) tells how Moses put on a veil to hide the splendor of his face after speaking with God and how in failing to see Jesus the Israelites are still veiled. This year's lesson (2 Cor 4:3-6) continues that reading, reminding us that now we have been given "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God." Jesus is the light which shines through the darkness, and the light is "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"!

This is what the Transfiguration can be for us: a glimpse of the glory of God in Jesus—a glimpse of knowledge shining in our ignorance and of light shining in the darkness. No matter what our moods or situations might be, both on the mountain tops and in the valleys of our life, the Lord in whom we trust is the Lord who once stood and who will again stand in glory as the end of God's redemption.

A bonus of the day is that the Transfiguration falls on the first Sunday of the month this year. That probably means a shorter sermon, requiring more diligent preparation to say what you want in a more economical time. But it also means that most of us will be celebrating Holy Communion, which, like the Transfiguration, is a "foretaste of the feast to come." Both point to the future, and knowing the future we live with true hope in the present!