

Erin Hollaar Pacheco
Hope CRC
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Transfiguration Sunday

Not Yet
Luke 9:28-36

It's been a long, cold winter.

Two weeks ago we were in South Florida visiting Moe's extended family. Snowbirds everywhere. (Those folks are on to something...)

We were sad to come back to Chicago.
We consoled ourselves that at least it was almost March.
So far, March feels an awful lot like January...

It's been a long winter. And it's been a long season of Epiphany. Easter is late this year – about as late as it gets. So Lent is late. And Epiphany is long.

Today is the final Sunday in Epiphany. And our text this morning is quite the epiphany moment. Mountaintop, dazzling light, mysterious figures from the past, a booming voice from heaven.

It's strange story. But for most of us, it's also very familiar. Because every year, right before Lent, our worship centers on this scene – what we've come to call The Transfiguration. It's a pivot point in Luke's gospel (and in Matthew and Mark as well). And it goes hand in hand with the verses before it, which we didn't read. But the connection is clear enough in our text, which begins "About eight days after he said this..."

Which begs the question: After he said what?

Luke is linking this moment on the mountain with a conversation Jesus has with his disciples.

Who do people say that I am? Some say John the Baptist, or a prophet, or Elijah.
Who do you say I am? And Peter – always Peter – says, "You're the Christ. The Messiah."

It's the right answer.

But they've got the wrong idea. In a day of Roman rule, and puppet kings, and limited autonomy, in a day when any sniff of insurrection is snuffed out and the roads are lined with bodies hung to die and dry out in the sun, those ancient prophetic promises of a Messiah – a king! a son of David! who would bring peace and justice for the oppressed, who would restore Israel, and set up his throne in power and glory and rule in Jerusalem forever – the air was thick with longing for this kind of Messiah. You could almost bite it with your teeth.

“You’re it,” says Peter.

“Don’t tell.” says Jesus.

And from that point on, he starts to dismantle their dreams.

Yes, he is the one they’ve been waiting for. But the Son of Man hasn’t come to side with their tribe and stamp out Roman rule. He’s come to suffer and die. And if you want to follow him, you’ve got to suffer too. Deny yourself. Take up your cross.

It’s a familiar exchange.

And it’s the backdrop to the scene we just read. “About eight days after Jesus said this...”

He’s just been talking about glory—even calling himself the Son of Man, the one Daniel saw coming on the clouds in glory.

And then Luke leads us up the mountain to see a glimpse of this glory...

This is not a screen church. We don’t really do that here.

But, if we did, this is the part where I’d suddenly project for you the 15th century icon of the transfiguration by Theophanes the Greek. Maybe you can Google it later.

Because it’s stunning. Your eye is drawn upward and at the top of the mountain is Jesus---robed in white, engulfed in light, and the shapes that symbolize deity and humanity are literally bending around him as he inexplicably fills both.

Beside him are Moses and Elijah, their faces earnest, their gaze on Jesus.

Below him, the three disciples cower and cover their eyes. Not understanding. Not able to withstand the dazzling light.

The scene is rife with symbolism. Moses and Elijah – embodying law and prophet – both had their own close encounters with God on a mountain, amid cloud and glory. This is a Mount Sinai kind of moment.

And Luke tells us that they’re talking with Jesus about his “departure.”

The Greek word is Exodus. Which can simply mean death--they’re talking about his death in Jerusalem. But Luke’s is the only gospel to use this word, and only here. He’s being deliberate. Because you can’t say “Exodus” beside Moses on a mountain, with a cloud, and not think of the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt. Their journey from slavery to freedom, from Pharaoh to promised land, from oppression to flourishing.

In the biblical story, and in first century Judaism, Exodus is an image of new creation. Goodness triumphs over evil. Wrongs are made right. A new humanity is formed. God is dwelling with his people. They're on their way to a place of promise and peace and shalom. Like Eden. Like it's supposed to be. "Exodus" means justice and hope, and victory—the end of exile and the restoration of all things.

And here is the Messiah, the Son of Man, in glory... and there's talk of Exodus fulfillment.

Had Peter, James, and John been awake to see and hear this, it is hard to imagine a greater excitement.

Of course, they've all but slept through the whole thing. And by the time they're coming to, Moses and Elijah are getting ready to go. So Peter, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, quickly blurts out something about building shelters.

It's a weird moment. I mean, it was weird already—there's plenty mysterious about this text. And now Peter has clearly not said the right thing.

What do we make of this?

When I was a kid in youth group, a familiar pattern emerged. Our group would go away on a service project or a retreat, or attend some huge youth rally at an arena brimming with teenage angst and eagerness—where invariably there would be an altar call with soft synth sounds and lots of crying.

And maybe it was that we were away from home and routines and parents, or that we had heightened expectations, or that the music and messages were geared specifically to teens... But it was somehow easier in these times to feel close to God. They were "mountaintop" experiences, where we rededicated our lives, renounced our pet sins, and resolved to be different from here on out.

But inevitably, shockingly, after a week or two back home, that resolve had eroded, the sins had crept back in, and we found ourselves longing for that closeness again. And looking forward to the next retreat, the next trip up the mountain.

Is this just a case of Peter wanting to seize hold of a spiritual high? Is his faux-pas essentially a failure to recognize the necessity of going back to the grind?

There might be more going on here.

The word translated for us as shelters is rendered elsewhere as tents or tabernacles. When Peter sees the glory of Jesus, and Moses and Elijah, he immediately thinks of building tents.

Why? There's a curious detail back in verse 28 that might serve as a clue. Luke places the transfiguration "about eight days" after Peter calls Jesus "Messiah."

It may very well be that these events took place during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, which could last up to eight days. As instituted back in Leviticus, this was a joyful feast of remembering the Exodus from Egypt and the way they dwelled with God in the wilderness in tents, or tabernacles. Each household would construct a makeshift shelter to eat in, and even sleep in, for seven days.

Like camping in the backyard. For a week.

It was fun. It was meant to be memorable. It was the highlight of the year.

The eighth day was optional. If the seven days looked back to the Exodus from Egypt, the eighth day looked ahead to a future age of flourishing in God's presence. Zechariah the prophet had envisioned a time when all the nations would come together to celebrate the feast of tabernacles in Jerusalem – "the feast to end all feasts." The eighth day leaned into this eschatological vision.

And so, on the eighth day, when Peter wakes up to see Elijah – the harbinger of the end – with Jesus in glory, he thinks this is it! The end of the age! The Messianic kingdom has come!

"Master, it's good to be here! Let's celebrate! I'll build the tents."

Peter's not even done talking before God – almost with a cosmic wave of hand – is shushing him with cloud and fear and sheer presence. Not unlike the scene at Sinai. And when God speaks, he speaks words of affirmation over Jesus, just like at his baptism. "This is my Son. Listen to him."

"Listen to him." It's an exact quote from Deuteronomy, where God promises another prophet like Moses to speak God's words. To mediate God's glory to the people. To lead them to the promised place of peace and rest.

In this moment -- in symbol, in word, in sight and sound, in layer upon layer, with building drama and intensity – Jesus is affirmed as the long-expected one who comes to make all things new.

To bring an end to violence.
To unify instead of polarize.
To protect the vulnerable.
To kick cancer once and for all.
To heal every ill and pain.
To undo every evil until all that's left is good.

"This is my Son. Listen to him."

And then, as suddenly as it all came, the voice is gone, the cloud is gone, the dazzle is gone, the others are gone, and it's just Jesus. Just Jesus and his three bewildered friends.

In the icon of the transfiguration, there's a poignant little depiction of what comes next. The icon reads a bit like a storyboard. Prior to the main scene, you see Jesus and the three going up the mountain. And, in almost perfect symmetry, you see them going back down the other side. Except there is a great weight to that downward trek. The disciples, quiet, wide-eyed, watch Jesus. And Jesus gently walks on, his finger pointing ahead toward what's to come.

Because, if we indeed "listen to him," this is what he says:

"the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected and killed,
and on the third day rise again."

"And whoever would be my disciple must deny themselves,
take up their cross, and follow me."

To me, there's something disheartening and disappointing about the transfiguration. We get a glimpse of the glorious ending, only to find out that we're still in the middle of the story, with terrible battles and losses yet ahead of us. Yes, glory. No, not yet.

In three days, it will be Ash Wednesday. The start of Lent. And for forty days, we will journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward the cross.

Every year, our lectionaries and liturgical calendars bring us back to this sequence.

Every year, we meet Jesus as Messiah.
Every year, we catch a glimpse of his glory.
Every year, we go back down the mountain.
Every year, we wear ashes and remember we are dust.
Every year, we walk with Jesus down the road that hurts.
The road to abandonment and pain and death.

But every year, we bring a different self to the journey. Our perspective and circumstances have shifted since last time. We bear different burdens. Perhaps we're grieving new losses, or carrying new fears. Our world is no less broken, but there are different headlines, different crises, catching our attention.

And some of the same struggles stay with us year after year.

There is much that is **not yet** made right.

Which is why Lent is a gift. It is here that the disappointing transience of the Transfiguration gives way to a deeper glory: wherever we suffer, there Jesus suffers with us.

In the night. In the hospital. In the tears. In the yelling. In the hurting and anger and shame and the worst moments of our lives.

Surely he has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs.

I wonder what it would look like for us to lean into that as we come into the season of Lent?

Much is made (in some circles, I suppose) of the practice of “giving something up for Lent.” Like meat, or chocolate, or Facebook. (One year I gave up make-up. It was forty days of “You look tired... Are you feeling okay?”)

Fasting from something is one way we can deny ourselves, as Jesus said. Giving something up can also make space in our minds and schedules for listening to Jesus, whatever that may look like for you.

But I wonder if it might be enough for some of us to just carry through this season the knowledge that Jesus is with you in your suffering... even as you walk with him in remembrance of his.

In our worship through Lent this year, we’ll hear testimonies of lament. Individuals in our congregation giving voice to the hard stuff of sin and suffering, as we journey together in the way of the cross. Which is the way of glory.

Friends, a great Exodus is coming. The arc of scripture bends ultimately to unending glory and the restoration of all things. We may even catch glimpses of that glory from time to time.

But now is not the end. Not yet.

For now, we listen to Jesus.

For now, we walk with him – back down the mountain to the places where needs are real and answers aren’t easy.

For now, we suffer with him – so that, someday, when our Messiah comes again in power to make all things new, we might be raised with him to share in his glory.

May the fellowship of Jesus, and that hope of glory, give you courage for whatever lies ahead.