

February 14, 2010 Transfiguration Sunday Yr C

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

"Are You Experienced?" Rev Seth D Jones

It is a great thing to be able to go to the top of a mountain.

When I was in Cooke City, I went to the top of several mountains. I had snowmobile riding lessons from an expert snowmobiler, Jeff Menuey. He was a former adrenaline junkie. He took me up to Mount Henderson. It was a sunny clear blue day and the snow was as white as it can possibly get. We could see far into Wyoming and all the way to Granite Peak.

In the Bible, great things often happen at the top of mountains. Moses received the Law on top of the mountain.

The Jews, freed from Israel, return to the mountain as proof of God's salvation.

Elijah defeats the prophets of Ba'al at the top of a mountain.

The prophets promise the feast of the Lord will take place on the mountain.

Jesus is tempted from the mountaintop.

And here, Jesus is transfigured at the top of a mountain.

A whole lot can be seen from the top of the mountain.

The spiritual mountain-top experience is a powerful place to see from as well. And often, nature and this mountain-top experience are closely linked. There is more than one mystically minded saint from the Christian past who recognized in the natural world a reflection of what Christ did for us on the Cross and in the Resurrection.

To find out what Jesus does for us is fairly straightforward if we are dealing with healings and teachings and parables. We can enter into the story and even imagine ourselves experiencing something like what the disciples witness in their time with Jesus.

Some of us even may have literally been healed by the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ.

These things make spiritual sense to us.

But the Gospels are built around 3 great mysteries that are very difficult for us to understand.

In Luke, these mysteries are presented as historical markers in the life of Christ.

They are:

Jesus' baptism;

the Transfiguration;

and the Resurrection.

Each one of those events transcends our human ability to understand.

What makes each of those events a great mystery is stated by Jesus in our reading.

They each speak to seeing the Kingdom of God.

Our reading for today begins at verse 28 in Luke's Gospel. There is good reason though, to read the Transfiguration story as a continuation of Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection. This means the Transfiguration mystery actually begins with verse 9:27, rather than 9:28.

I think we fear the implications of placing verse 9:28 with 9:27 as the beginning of the Transfiguration story.

I will get to those implications in a moment.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the faith, those who worship in the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and various other Orthodox churches, they hold the Transfiguration as the central story for the Christian faith.

The Transfiguration holds an equal standing to the Resurrection.

They do not fear seeing the kingdom of God coming with power in the Transfiguration.

Just to be clear, let me read 9:27-28 together so you can hear how they fit together.

READ 9:27-28

Do you hear it?

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to show them what it means *for us* to see the Kingdom of God.

The Law of Moses says that at least two witnesses must be present in order to verify an event. When Jesus gets up to the top of the mountain, he is "transfigured". The Greek word is "metamorphosis".

It means to be changed completely and has meanings that point to beauty and wonder. We don't get many details in any of the Gospels here. The only thing we know is that Jesus' clothes became a "dazzling white" or "white as snow", something we can relate to. The Gospel of Mark adds that Jesus' clothes were white in such a way that no launderer could bleach them that white.

We also know that Elijah and Moses appeared as well;

the receiver of the Law and the prophet of the Prophets.

Elijah, of course, is the only person who does not suffer physical death in the Bible - he is physically ascended into heaven by a chariot of horses come to carry him home in front of Elisha.

And Moses is the only person in the Bible to be buried by the Lord God himself.

The tradition of Judaism holds that neither Moses nor Elijah actually died but were bodily transported by God.

This is a reunion of the chosen Ones of God. If they could have ordered pizza, they may very well have done so.

There are all sorts of questions I have here, ones that will not be answered until the other side. They may not matter much, but I wonder,

What did Jesus, Moses and Elijah talk about?

I wonder, Will I know who Moses and Elijah and Jesus are when they appear to me?

How did the disciples know it was them?

But these are side issues.

There is an unspoken assurance right in the center of this grand meeting.

In the power of Jesus Christ, the living and the dead will meet again. Those who have gone before us will greet us at the mountaintop of death and resurrection.

And this is a fearful thing.

We want to be comforted by the idea of our resurrection body, of our meeting again with those who have died and passed on.

But I think Peter's reaction is a little more accurate than our fantasies.

This reunion is a terrifying prospect.

Over the past week and a half, we have had to deal with several deaths of beloved members of this community in Rockland and this church. These assurances of which the Transfiguration and Jesus' Resurrection speak of are not very effective in the time of grief and mourning.

They are almost too amazing,
Too strange,
Too fantastic to even consider.

The great mysteries of our faith in Christ are indeed amazing and strange. We are supposed to be amazed and perhaps even frightened by them.

And when we are amazed,
confronted with something out of this world,
something that blows our minds,
we want to do what Peter wants to do -
memorialize the occasion,
stay in amazement and wonder forever.
We want to build things to remind us of what we experienced.
Lock it down.
Make it real forever.

We want to create things with our own hands and our own images and our own understanding.

Like Peter, when confronted with the power of God, we miss the point entirely.
In the height of Peter's inability to understand, God appears in a cloud and points Peter in the right direction.

The focus of our lives, especially when we recognize the presence of God in life,
is not the things we have built,
the ideas we have constructed,
the images we have created.

The focus of our lives is Jesus Christ and Christ alone.

"When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

Elijah and Moses are no longer present.

Only Jesus.

Jesus with us. Immanuel. God-with-us.

No more Law.

No more prophets.

No more human creations.

Only Jesus and Jesus alone.

This is a stunning understanding of what it means to see the Kingdom of God.

And here is where many of us stop, particularly in evangelical Christianity.

This is a lot and for many it is enough, but it is only one side of the equation.

We miss a whole other side to this Transfiguration event on the mountain if we stop with Jesus with us.

We need to go one step further, like our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters.

They ask,

"Why is Jesus with us?"

"Why is it only Jesus alone?"

"Why did Jesus need witnesses to show his glory?"

These questions and their answers only makes sense if we look to Jesus and see something about ourselves. Right here are the implications which bring the fear and terror that Peter experienced.

Because when we look upon the transfigured Jesus,

we are looking upon what we are becoming in Christ.

In Matthew, Jesus explains the parable of the weeds of the fields to the disciples. Right at the end he says,

"Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father." (Mt 13:43).

Soon after telling this parable, Jesus shows the three disciples to the mountain to show them what this means in the Transfiguration.

Or hear Paul, in Romans, when he says this:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us."

The glory he is referring to is the life we will share in Christ.

For, as Paul makes clear again and again,
just as we share in a death like Christ's,
so also will we share in a Resurrection like Christ's.

The thing that Jesus is transfigured into is his Resurrection body.

Just before the Transfiguration in Luke,
Jesus makes it a point to talk about what will happen on the way to the Cross.
He *must* suffer and die,
just as we all suffer and die.

Peter, clearly, would rather that not happen.

He wants to stay on the mountain.

But the future we share with Christ,
the one Jesus presents to John, James and Peter on the mountain,
cannot happen unless Jesus dies and is raised up again.

In other words, we are looking at *our* future when we look at the transfigured Jesus on the mountain. Through Jesus Christ, we share in *seeing* the Kingdom of God.

The early church fathers understood this in very powerful ways.

Their understandings have vast implications for how we live our lives and look at ourselves and one another.

One of those church fathers, Irenaeus, had a saying:

"God became man, that man might become God."

This is radical, wild stuff.

What he meant though was,

when we wonder what God is doing with us, in our innermost souls, in the direction of our lives,
look to Jesus.

When you wonder what it means to be adopted by God to be an heir of the Kingdom of God,
look to Jesus.

And when we look to Jesus,

we are looking to the mysteries of Christ's life among and within us.

Yes, we look to the healings of the spirit,
the transformation of our lives amongst one another,
the work of the church in the world.

But more so, we look to the great mysteries of our life in Christ.

Where does that mystery begin?

In our baptism, where we,
in community with other believers,

acknowledge the reception of the grace of God, as mysterious as a dove descending from heaven.

If you remember, we began the season of Epiphany with Jesus' baptism.

Who can explain what happens in baptism?

Our traditions provide a practiced response, but the more you think about your baptism, the deeper it gets.

The act becomes a story.

The story becomes a life.

And the life which unfolds from our baptism begins to weave itself into the story of the God who became a human being for our sake.

Where does this earthly mystery end?

In death, in the Great Crossing as the Pilgrims called it, where the mystery of life becomes the mystery of death.

Where does the mystery continue?

In the resurrection we share with Christ.

It is a strange and radical future we look forward to, where the dead and the living reunite.

Where the glory of God shines forth from each one of us,

because by the grace of God through Jesus Christ,
we share in the glory of Jesus Christ.

"That which Christ is in his glory by nature, all humankind shall be by adoption through the incarnation" (MC Steenberg, 2 Natures Man, Pro Ecclesia, Vol XIV, #4. pg 420).

"The glory of Christ is the glory of humankind" (ibid, pg 425).

Can you conceive of this?

To put it in the simplest terms I can:

When we look at Christ, we look at our shared future.

When we look into our lives,

especially when confronting the loss of loved ones,

Or when we are very sick ourselves,

Or perhaps when we face some great evil,

Possibilities and futures become framed by what we are experiencing.

Hope often disappears.

Faith struggles.

There is no future, except a dark one.

Can we see the possibility of the transfigured Christ in those possibilities, in those futures?

Knowing this Christ-focused potential is inside of each of us, how does your sense of the future change, even in the face of death, sickness, evil?

Are despair and hopelessness even possible

knowing the Transfiguration awaits all of us in Christ?

What does it mean for God's love to radiate out from you,
just as it radiates naturally from Jesus Christ?

What does the world look like if we who believe we will share in the glory of Christ's glory come together with that knowledge of ourselves and each person we meet and see in the world,

the glorious creation that God has given us?

What then do the great mysteries of Christ's life mean for us?

Amen.