

Transfiguration

There have been a lot of Sundays after Epiphany this year. Easter will be in late April, so Lent finally begins only this week. Perhaps by late April the temperature will finally be above freezing.

Having so many Sundays after Epiphany gave us all fresh material to think about, Bible passages that don't often occur together in the lectionary. Alas, that advantage ended last week. On the last Sunday after Epiphany in *every* year we hear about the Transfiguration. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of what happened to Jesus and a few chosen disciples on the mountain. In addition, the Transfiguration gets its own feast day every August 6th. So if the Gospel lesson sounded familiar, that's why.

What did happen on that mountain? It's really hard to imagine. One commentator put the problem succinctly: "The nature of the event is such as to almost defy historical investigation." In other words, the Transfiguration is so far outside the realm of ordinary human experience that it's difficult to get our heads wrapped around it. Even the resurrection of Jesus Christ is more accessible. We know of people who have been revived, so imagining a resurrection is not such a stretch. But who has seen a person's whole being flash like lightning and then heard them in conversation with two other people long dead? Just what did happen on that mountain?

As much as my scientific nature would like to nail down the particulars, I've learned to ask a different kind of question. Instead of what happened, I now ask what did it mean? How does the Transfiguration fit into the larger story of Jesus? It is described differently in each Gospel because each Gospel writer had a different focus for his narrative.

Take Luke, for instance, who told the story we heard today. In Luke, it all started when Jesus was at prayer. His whole face changed – the Greek literally says that it "became other." Moses and Elijah appeared, and Luke included their conversation. They talk about the "exodus" – translated "departure" – that Jesus is about to complete. The disciples were sleepy and then terrified as they were engulfed by a cloud. The voice in the cloud called Jesus the Chosen One, not the Beloved. All of these are characteristics peculiar to Luke's telling of the story. Why did he choose to include them?

By setting the context in prayer and saying that Jesus "became other," dazzling white, Luke is clearly telling us that in connecting with God, Jesus took on the glory of God. Jesus has entered into God's time, eternity, where Moses and Elijah can be still alive. The connection between Jesus and Moses is further developed by recalling the Exodus. Just as Moses led the chosen people from slavery to freedom, the Chosen One will accomplish the salvation of all through his death in Jerusalem. How that would happen did not become clear until much later, so the three witnesses kept silent in those days.

The experience could not last, as much as Peter tried to make it so. They had to come down from the mountain. As soon as they did, they were met by a great crowd and immediately confronted by a man seeking help for his son. The change from heavenly to earthly is so abrupt in Luke that “Jesus appears like a visitor from another world who has to put up with the unbelief” of humanity, the same commentator notes. The Gospel of Mark paints an unflattering picture of the disciples wrangling with the crowd, but Luke leaves that out. He also omits much of the conversation between Jesus and the father. Luke’s version is short. In quick succession Jesus rebukes the spirit, heals the boy, and gives him back to his father. It all reinforces the sense that here is someone extraordinary, truly different, another order of being, if you will.

Luke isn’t the only one who has that view of Jesus. So does St. Paul. He, too, talks about Jesus and Moses, reinterpreting a passage from the book of Exodus that was our first reading this morning. In that passage, Moses had been talking with God on Mount Sinai, receiving the two tablets of the covenant (what we call the Ten Commandments). Moses did not realize that his face was shining because he had been talking with God. His face was so distracting that he put on a veil to cover it, so that people wouldn’t be afraid to come near him. Paul reinterpreted the purpose of the veil. Moses needed it, said Paul, so no one would notice that God’s glory eventually faded. Paul then said, metaphorically, that the veil is still there whenever the words of Moses are read. Only in Christ is the veil set aside. Once again Jesus is portrayed and someone truly extraordinary, wholly other.

We need to be reminded of that every year before we enter Lent. Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God – through the visit of the Wise Men soon after his birth, by his baptism in the river Jordan, by changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and then through the remarkable experience of the Transfiguration. They all tell us that Jesus Christ is God, fully divine.

As we walk with this Jesus through the forty days of Lent, we will be more and more confronted by his humanity, until we find ourselves at the foot of the cross where he will cry out as though abandoned by God and die. It will be a hard journey, and we would not have the strength for it if we didn’t carry the memory of what Peter, John, and James saw.

I don’t know what really happened on that mountain. On this earth, I may never know. But I do know that for the people who witnessed it, its meaning became clear once they had experienced the presence of the risen Christ. The man whose face became other, who cast out unclean spirits and healed sick people, who walked resolutely to the death he knew would come – this man was none other than the Son of God, the Chosen One. On this last Sunday of Epiphany, let us remember to give praise and glory to that Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

[Last Sunday after Epiphany: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43a. The commentator is I. Howard Marshall in *The Gospel of Luke*, a volume in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*.]