

Transfiguration Sunday/Boy Scout Sunday/February 10, 2013

Exodus 34:29-25; Luke 9:28-43a

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"Transformed by Transfiguration"

The Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain top is one of the most important and symbolically saturated stories within the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. If you were raised in the church, this story should be very familiar to you but if you don't know this story, it is one you should take time to read and learn about. For in the three Synoptic Gospels, it plays a very important role in the Jesus story. It marks the point at the end of Jesus' Galilean ministry when he turns his face toward Jerusalem and to the death he knows he must suffer there. It also is an event that clarifies, at least for the three disciples who were with him, and certainly for the recipients of these gospels, who this person is. That he is indeed the one whom Peter has just confessed as *"The Christ of God"* (Luke 9:20).

The Transfiguration does within these gospels what the gospels themselves set out to do. That is to inform the reader or the listener with the knowledge of Jesus' divinity, that he is God's Son, is the Christ, the anointed, the Messiah, the supreme messenger of God's intent for humanity and the whole of creation, however you want to say it. That in Jesus we find the way to life, the way to live and that it is in pursuing this way that we find transformation into something new.

If we take even a cursory look at the Transfiguration, we will find all kinds of things that tell us something about what is going on. Let's start with the mountain. Mountains of course are in many religion's scriptures, places where experiences of the divine, of God, what we call a "theophany" often take place. Moses experienced God in the tremors, fire and smoke on Mt. Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments. Elijah was on Mt. Horeb when he experienced God, not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire but in the still, small voice. And here, we are to know that just like those experiences, this is an experience of God's presence as well and that presence dwells within Jesus.

Then there is the whole light show thing. Jesus and his inner circle, the three disciples Peter, James and John, go up the mountain where they have this amazing experience. Jesus is transfigured, changed into a glowing entity from head to toe. Now this might remind a person familiar with the Hebrew scriptures of that story about Moses that we just heard earlier today of how the skin of his face shown each time he was in the presence of God. And it's supposed to do that. When somebody near you starts to glow and have this brilliance so bright that you can hardly bear to look at them, start looking around for God. It's a pretty good indicator of God's presence.

Then we have the sudden appearance of these two old guys, Moses and Elijah. Now again, there is symbolism here. They aren't just there because they are Jesus' favorite Old Testament characters. They represent the essence of Jewish faith, the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Luke wants us to realize that Jesus is not nullifying the tenets of the Jewish faith but rather he is fulfilling them. He is a continuation of that same faith, a continuation of the covenant between the people Israel and God.

One symbol unique to Luke's gospel, the reason they go up the mountain to begin with. That is to pray. As I shared with the Thursday Bible Study group at Harbor Hill, for Luke, prayer is vital to the life of Jesus and to the life of faith. In Luke more than the other gospels, we will find Jesus in prayer at all of the most important events of his life. He is in prayer at his baptism. He is at prayer with the disciples before Peter's confession of him as the Christ. He is in prayer at the Mount of Olives before his arrest and crucifixion. And he is at prayer when he is transfigured. Obviously Luke thinks that prayer is an important part of the life of faith.

Another item here unique to Luke is that he tells us what Jesus and Moses and Elijah are talking about. They are discussing his "*departure*", his forthcoming death that he must face. You see, earlier when Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, Jesus tells them that the Christ must "*suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" But the disciples don't want to hear that. That is not their vision of what Messiah is to be. And they will struggle throughout the rest of the story to accept that.

So, by Luke having this "*departure*" as the topic those three are speaking about, along with the voice of God that speaks out of the cloud declaring "*This is my Son, my chosen*" and telling the disciples to "*listen to him*", Luke reiterates the importance of Jesus' suffering death and resurrection. In addition to this, there is something about that word "*departure.*" It can also be translated "*exodus.*" Of course exodus is a very important word in the Hebrew scriptures. It is the Exodus from Egypt that leads the people of Israel to freedom.

Surely, this is part of Luke's message to his readers. It is through his *departure*, his *death*, his *exodus*, that Jesus knows freedom and resurrection. And for those who would be his followers, it is the same, as Paul would say, *it is through death to the old self that we find our new selves.* And it is in death or departure from old ways that we find and discover new ways of being that lead to life and fulfillment.

As followers of Christ, we are called to recognize the importance of letting go of the things that keep us from knowing God's real presence with us. We have to learn to recognize when we need to let go of the old ways, to depart from those things that obstruct the working of the Spirit of God in our midst.

Throughout our history, this has happened time and again. In the Protestant Reformation, in the Abolitionist movement, in the cause for Women's Suffrage, in the Civil Rights movement. In so many periods of history when transformation was needed and change was required, people had to see the vision of what was possible and what was required and where the presence of God and the guidance of the Spirit was pointing and then they had to commit themselves to going that way, willing to work and even suffer for the transformation in their time and place.

And now we are being called again to work to transform our world. To seek the reign of God in our midst. In our time one of our callings is to stand beside our brothers and sisters of gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual orientation. Our faith teaches us that they too deserve to be treated equally and given the rights and freedoms others within our society enjoy and we here at First Church have expressed this in our Welcoming Statement.

But our work is not done. On this Sunday that many communities of faith set aside to recognize the Boy Scouts of America, an organization which has benefited many and done great good throughout its history, we need to call this organization to account and encourage them to depart from their policies of exclusion of homosexual youth and adults from their membership and programs. These past few weeks I and others from our congregation have worked to fashion a letter to send to the two Boy Scout councils in Maine for this very purpose. The letter is posted in the parlor and available for you to read. I encourage you to take a look at it and to share your response.

Times of change and transformation are always difficult. The way of Christ does include suffering and death as well as resurrection. And new life cannot take place if we do not let some things die. We are in the midst of an epic time in history and there is still much work to be done. The coming of God's reign does not happen by itself. It is necessary that we do our part. May we through prayer, with a true openness to God's presence and Spirit and in loving fellowship with one another, come to know the new life of God as we follow together in the way of Christ. Amen.