

Shine!

This morning, Luke gives us one of the most mystical moments in the Gospels. Having taken his three favorite disciples up a mountain, Jesus prays, and all Heaven breaks loose. Our Lord is suddenly radiant, shining with divine glory and deep in conversation with Moses and Elijah. A cloud descends, terrifying the poor disciples, and the Father's voice comes booming out of it: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Then, poof! The pyrotechnics and heavenly visitors evaporate, leaving Jesus standing alone, looking every inch his normal, everyday self. Not surprisingly, the disciples don't tell anyone what they've seen. Who would believe them?

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus mostly engages with the people around him looking like an ordinary man. But Luke in particular likes to tantalize us with those rare moments in Jesus's ministry when heavenly grace and glory break through to reveal his divine nature. So, for example, Mark briefly reports that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism. Luke, on the other hand, tells us that Jesus went into the desert filled with the Holy Spirit, then recounts his entire conversation with the adversary. Luke is especially determined to make us understand that Jesus isn't just a skilled healer or a wise prophet. He's the Son of Adonai himself, as fully divine as he is fully human, uniquely worthy of our love and praise.

That may be why the lectionary gives us Luke's version of the Transfiguration even in a year when we're reading our way through the Gospel of Matthew. This being Transfiguration Sunday, perhaps the editors wanted us to feel the full force of Jesus's divinity. In fairness, however, Matthew's description of Jesus's transfiguration is a little less detailed than Luke's, but the two really aren't all that different. So why the departure from Matthew into Luke?

Perhaps it's because Luke is the only evangelist to tell us that Jesus took the disciples up the mountain and started to *pray*. That's what touches off the Transfiguration. When Jesus prays,

he enters directly into the presence of his beloved Abba and, suddenly, the disciples are able to see the glory of Heaven shining through him. It's similar to what happens when Moses speaks directly with Adonai on Mount Sinai. Their conversation sets Moses' skin aglow. The difference, though, is that the light of Moses' face is a mere reflection of the glory of Adonai. Jesus's glory is his own, which is why he's lit up from head to toe. And although we refer to this event as the Transfiguration, Jesus isn't exactly transformed by his prayers. It may be more accurate to say that, as he prays to the Father, Jesus's divine nature is fully revealed.

Why does Jesus choose this particular day to give these particular disciples a glimpse of Heaven? Luke tells us that the Transfiguration takes place about eight days after Jesus started warning the disciples about his Passion. Perhaps the disciples didn't understand or couldn't accept what he said. Matthew tells us that Peter was especially resistant, practically ordering Jesus not to talk about his death just one chapter before the Transfiguration. Perhaps Jesus took Peter and the Sons of Thunder up the mountain so they could see for themselves that their rabbi was far more than the mortal man they thought they knew. Peter's reaction to seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah, the legendary embodiments of the Law and the Prophets, is just priceless. He truly doesn't get it, but he tries so hard! Despite his later mistakes, Peter's wholehearted devotion to Jesus even when he didn't understand what he saw must have been an essential factor in Jesus's choice of Peter to be the rock on which his church would be founded.

Luke makes another point that Mark and Matthew don't. Luke tells us that, although the disciples are exhausted after their hike up the mountain, they get to see Jesus in his glory because they manage to keep awake. Their wakefulness here foreshadows their tragic slumber in the Garden of Gethsemane. Atop the mountain, the disciples are blessed to experience Jesus and the Father as they truly are. In the garden, they awake from sleep to the nightmare of seeing Jesus

taken prisoner and led to an agonizing death. The disciples, perhaps especially James, John, and Peter, must have tortured themselves for failing to stay awake when they thought the Lord needed them most.

The Transfiguration can be difficult to preach because none of us are likely to witness the risen Jesus in all his shining glory on any given day. There aren't any tidy parallels between the disciples' miraculous mountaintop experience and our very secular 21st century life. And then, of course, there's the postmodern skepticism that demands hard forensic proof of any unusual occurrence. We tend to disbelieve eyewitness testimony, no matter who it comes from. But I'm not prepared to call the deathbed confession of Jesus's foremost disciple a fantasy or a lie. Peter says it happened, and he was there. I think we have to take his word for it.

So, what can we mere mortals learn from Luke's account of the Transfiguration? I believe there are at least three things. First, if we want to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to stay awake and watch for it. Before he ascended, Jesus promised to leave us in the care of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who has plenty of divine magic of her own. If we ask humbly and pay attention, the Holy Spirit might just give us an occasional taste of what eternal life is like in a place where everyone shines with divine radiance and it's possible to strike up a casual conversation with the greatest of God's saints and even Jesus himself. This world can be very dark; to live in it well, we need all the heavenly light we can get.

And that leads to the second point. Jesus is transfigured when he prays because prayer centers him in his loving relationship with the Father. There are many prayers that we can say by rote. Jesus taught us the best one himself, and we'll say it this morning as we share the Eucharist. But our prayers can be more than just dutiful recitation. As Marcus Borg observes in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Jesus offers an alternative wisdom that can lead us from

the secular wisdom of having heard about God, through the secondhand wisdom of general belief in the Bible and church doctrine, to the firsthand wisdom that comes from a life spent in relationship with God. And as Archbishop Rowan Williams affirms in his book *Tokens of Trust*, because God continues to create “within every circumstance, every object, [and] every person ... each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we've ever thought about it.” When we stop cowering in fear, wallowing in guilt, and begging for favors, prayer can become an ongoing conversation with the God who makes, redeems, and sustains us. Praying from sincere and open hearts can teach us to sit calmly in God’s presence and listen until we can hear the still, small voice that offers meaning, comfort, and purpose in our lives.

It isn’t always easy to have a relationship with someone as enormous and powerful as our God. The disciples were struck dumb with terror when they first encountered God’s glory, and they had been hanging out with Jesus for years. But our Father told them, and us, how to get over our fear when he said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” As we listen to Jesus and practice what he preaches, we can learn how to live fearlessly in a loving relationship with God. When we do, we won’t be transfigured like Jesus, because only he is a fully human being who is also fully divine. But perhaps, like Moses, we can take in a little of God’s glory and reflect it back to the world. We can pray, study, listen, and follow Jesus’s new Commandment to love God with all our hearts and all our minds and all our strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We can learn to trust God and let the light of heaven come into our hearts and illuminate our faces. We can learn to *shine*. And if enough of us do that, we might just change the world. In the light of Jesus’s glorious Name, amen.