

“My Son, My Chosen; Listen to Him”
Exodus 34:27-35; Luke 9:28-36

Elon Community Church
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“The Word of God for the people of God; Thanks be to God.”

In the culture that surrounds us, today is Valentine’s Day! Chocolate, chocolate everywhere, heart-shaped chocolates! And from Southern Season in Chapel Hill, these items that it’s now much too late to order (though if you go there this afternoon, you may find them on sale!): Love and Roses Chocolate Sampler, Heart-to-Heart Gift Basket, Velvet Heart of Belgian Chocolate, even Valentine-red heart-shaped Moravian cookies! ... Perhaps I should have titled this meditation “Valentine Red and Dazzling White;” because in the culture we are celebrating romantic love while in church’s liturgical calendar, today is the day devoted to that episode in the experience of Jesus and his core disciples we call The Transfiguration – an experience of divine transcendence.

In eastern orthodox churches, Transfiguration is celebrated in early August, and its feast day is considered one of the major feast days of the year. But in Protestant traditions like our own, this Sunday is the final Sunday of the Epiphany season, which begins you may recall with the Baptism of Jesus and ends with Transfiguration – bookends which confirm the identity of Jesus as God’s beloved Son. In each occasion, the Voice of God proclaims: “This is my Son, my Beloved.” So, before we enter the Season of Lent, which begins this week with Ash Wednesday, these last 6 Sundays have been devoted to discovering who Jesus is, searching for our own answers to the question that Jesus put to his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?”

Luke reports that just prior to this mountain-top experience, Jesus discussed just this question with his disciples.

*One day when he was praying alone in the presence of his disciples, he asked them, “Who do the people say that I am? They answered, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”
But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”*

Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Once again, I am sure, such news puzzled the disciples. Everyone expected God’s Messiah/ the anointed one/the Christ to usher in a period of the resurgence of Israel. Somehow, the Messiah would end this oppressive occupation by Rome. How does that square with this talk of the Son of Man’s death? ... And he charges the disciples not to speak of it outside their community. It’s as if Jesus says: don’t talk about it, but stay tuned; watch and see. Notice that Jesus does not here refer to himself as the Christ. He uses instead that term he often used to refer to himself, “Son of Man” – which sometimes seems to mean simply “I, a man” as when he said “The Son of Man has no where to lay his head.” But then again it takes on an expanded meaning as it does in the continuation of this conversation, when Jesus warned that following after him would entail a cross to bear and a willingness to risk one’s own safety.

*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? – Jesus asks –
If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*

With this conversation fresh on their minds – and on the minds of Luke’s audience, which today includes you and me – Luke continues, giving us a clue that this conversation and what is about to happen are linked.

Reading now from the New International Version of the scriptures:

²⁸About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³²Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.)

Jesus holds a conversation with two of the most revered holy men of Israel – Moses, Israel’s liberator and its guide through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, and Elijah, the prophet who did not die but was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind and whose return it was expected would usher in the messianic age. Even today, when Jewish families celebrate the Passover, for instance, there is an Elijah’s cup and an empty Elijah’s chair set at the table.

Notice how Luke characterizes their conversation. *They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.* “His departure” – other translations call it “his escape,” his “exit,” his “outgoing,” or “his exodus” which he would soon “bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.” It is the same word used to refer to Israel’s Exodus from Egypt. The presence of these revered men of Israel, themselves having heard the voice of God and acted in accordance with it, confer with Jesus about his divine mission. His exodus will accomplish miraculous outcomes that will echo Israel’s liberation from Egypt.

N.T. Wright sheds light on that connection to what has come before: "In the new Exodus, Jesus will lead all God's people out of the slavery of sin and death, and home to their promised inheritance – the new creation in which the whole world will be redeemed."

And Peter, not knowing what to say, seems to want to preserve the moment by doing something, building something. Alan Culpepper observes: "Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced."

The divine voice spoke of this more faithful response:

³⁴While Peter was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

There are some wonderful images of this moment created by artists throughout the centuries. Take some time this afternoon, or soon, and type “Transfiguration” into your computer’s search engine. Take a careful look at what you will find. You will see a Byzantine icon of the scene that is in the

Louvre Museum in Paris. You will find a similar image from the Annunciation Cathedral, which is actually inside the Kremlin in Moscow. There is a stunning mosaic from the 6th century in the apse of the Basilica of the Monastery of St. Catherine located on Mt Sinai. And also in the apse of the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor in Israel, the site long believed to be the location of the Transfiguration. There are hundreds more.

Most famous of all, perhaps, is Raphael's portrayal of the moment: Jesus is flanked by Elijah and Moses, the three of them suspended in the air above Peter, James and John who are awaking from their slumber to this fantastic scene. Raphael's painting, begun in 1516, not yet finished at his death in 1520, was completed by his pupils. An early biographer called it his "most beautiful and most divine." Designed as an altar piece, it hangs now in a room devoted Raphael's art in the Vatican Museum in Rome.

Why has this scene been so important throughout the centuries? A Franciscan priest in the community of friars at the Church of the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor has written:

"Jesus was transfigured." This is a theological passive. ... It was accomplished by God. He is the power-source of the activity, invisible but very much present and involved. ... This scene in the Transfiguration event is a first, visible response of God, the loving Father to the fidelity displayed by His Beloved Son ... The Man Jesus, for only a brief moment, becomes precisely what He will be on that future day and then forever after His Resurrection, ... the perfect image of redeemed humanity in a liberated state and elevated to the divine.

If you look carefully at Raphael's painting, you'll see that the top half represents the Transfiguration itself while the bottom half includes the next event in the gospel story. Matthew, Mark and Luke all link this mountain-top experience with the shrieking demon-possessed boy in the valley. When Jesus, Peter, James and John descend the mountain they are met by a large crowd and a man who says that his son is possessed of a demon that throws him into convulsions. "I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."

Jesus responds with exasperation at what he calls "this unbelieving and perverse generation." Then, reads Luke, "Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, cured the boy, and gave him back to his father." Luke concludes: "And they were all struck with awe at the majesty of God." The disciples who had seen God's majesty on the mountain saw what it actually accomplishes in the face of human need down below.

I want to also draw your attention to the Epistle lesson given for us today. In his second letter to the Corinthian congregation, the 3rd chapter, St. Paul refers to Moses' experience on Mt Sinai, and to the veil that Moses wore when he returned from being in God's presence – the veil that protected the people from being blinded by the glow of holiness. Notice, however, that Paul moves that veil onto the heads of those who only live under the old covenant, which Jesus has superseded.

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever

Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Paul asserts that we ourselves are being transfigured, transformed. ... Hear that thought again from The Message, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible into contemporary language:

¹⁶⁻¹⁸Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

This is an astounding claim and prospect, and probably frightening for those of us who are suspicious of ecstatic experiences. But if it should happen that we ourselves are transfigured, transformed, if we should have such spiritually uplifting experiences, recall today's gospel lesson. Transfiguration is linked to service to a suffering world. Be aware, as NT Wright has observed, "The more open we are to God, and to the different dimensions of God's glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world. We are right to be wary when we return from some great worship service, when we rise from a time of prayer in which God has seemed close and his love real and powerful. These things are never given for their own sake, but so that, as we are equipped by them, God can use us within his needy world" (*Luke for Everyone*).

May we this day be encouraged and inspired to do the same: to be present with Jesus, both up on the mountain and down below, aligning ourselves with the divine power of God – being charged by that power – both empowered and directed – to respond to the needs of the people.