

Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway
February 19, 2023 Transfiguration Sunday

Liminal Spaces

Every year on the Sunday before the season of Lent begins our suggested readings for the day take us to the story of the Transfiguration. It is a story recounted in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and the version we read this morning from Luke. I have always liked the story and the way it is woven into the cycle of our church year. In a way it feels like nourishment, strength, encouragement for the journey of Lent that looms before us. Not quite on the same plain as Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday before Ash Wednesday but kind of along the same lines.

The Transfiguration, as we read, is the story of a multi sensory revelation of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. We can't miss it. First there is the visual. The gospel writers tell us Jesus' clothes become dazzling white. The first hearers of this story, and even us today, when we get a nudge of reminder from our reading from Exodus that Maureen just read for us, we see that this story is firmly rooted in other Biblical stories of encounters with God.

Maureen reminded us that Moses' face shone so brightly after he had been talking with God on Mount Sinai that he wore a veil to protect others from the brightness, when he would come back down from *his* mountaintop experiences. If that is not enough, Peter, John and James, the disciples who witness the transfiguration, also see Elijah and Moses with Jesus when he is transfigured. One could not think of two more appropriate people from the faith tradition to remind us of God's presence and action in the world. **God is in this moment.**

Then there is the auditory. Luke says a voice comes from the clouds, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" There is no mistaking that.

Finally, if one needs any more convincing, that here we are witnessing an epiphany, an appearance of God, an encounter with God, and in turn a clear validation of who Jesus is, this all takes place on a mountain top. The transfiguration is a mountain top experience literally and figuratively.

I would imagine that many of us have had our own literal mountain top experiences. I grew up making regular trips to Yosemite National Park with my

family. The top of Glacier Point is one of my favorites. In scripture, as is still the case today, literal mountain top experiences, those times when we are on top of some favorite mountain, looking out at the beauty of God's creation, those times often coincide with figurative mountain top experiences as well, when we feel profoundly, intimately in tune with God.

There is more than enough for a sermon right here, about mountain top experiences, those times when we know we are hearing, seeing, experiencing God close and personal. About how these experiences *do* nourish us for the journeys of our lives. How they illumine our lives and guide our choices as individuals and as congregations. How they often guide us through the valleys that are a part of life as well.

This week as I pondered this text, drawing near to Lent this year, I found myself struck by another dimension of our reading for this morning as well.

The story begins, "Now, about eight days later..."

In all three of the gospel accounts the story of the transfiguration occurs following a time when Jesus is teaching his disciples about the cost of discipleship. If you look at the verses immediately preceding our reading for this morning here in Luke you will find Jesus saying, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

Jesus here is beginning to set his face toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. And he is telling his disciples that if they are going to follow him their's will be a difficult journey a well. There will be times of suffering, times when they will have to deny themselves. Times when they will have to declare that faithfulness is more important than security or safety. This tough description of discipleship is our immediate context for this mountaintop event.

The transfiguration story begins, 'now about eight days after these sayings...'. Mark and Matthew have it at six days, but regardless of the exact time line there is a in-between time for the disciples between hearing about the cost of discipleship and being on that mountain top.

I wonder how it was to be in that space. Of knowing that their teacher and Messiah was going to suffer and die and that they some how would be called upon to go on,

to carry his message forward, and yet they had no clear vision of what that future looked like, except that it involved suffering, following and trusting.

I have heard this kind of in-between space called liminal space - “space on the thresh hold, when you have left the ‘tried and true’ but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else.” What Presbyterian pastor, Shannon Kershner calls, “that unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where God is always leading them.”¹

It is true, isn't it? How often do you find yourself saying, ‘What now God?’ ‘Where do you want me?’ ‘What do you want me to do?’ When have you found yourself standing on a thresh hold, between the familiar and God’s vision for your future? With no clear vision yet, just that sense that being faithful to God’s call for you is going to involve suffering, following and trusting. Not only not seeing the path clearly, but also knowing that at times it is not going to be easy.

Before the disciples came to this mountain top they were living in *their* liminal spaces - that unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where God is always leading them.

It happens for us as individuals and for us as a congregation. Liminal spaces, between the familiar and God’s vision for our future. It could not be more true for us here now, could it? You, between the pastoral leadership you had before and the head-of-staff pastor and the ministry that is yet to come for you. And me as your transitional pastor, your interim pastor. Everything says, ‘in-between time.’ Liminal space. When you are precisely asking those questions, “What now God?”, “What do you want us to do next?”, “Who do you want us to be in ministry in this time?”

It is in the midst of the disciples’ liminal space, in-between, what next space that our story for this morning takes place. Those mountain tops we talked of earlier, of knowing God is near, of sensing God’s direction, God’s power and God’s love with dazzling clarity do come. As one commentator put it, “After waiting those eight long days filled with fear, ambiguity, and anticipation the disciples were given an epiphany moment, a moment to burn into their memories, to sustain them on the way to the cross and beyond.”²

¹ *Good Preacher, Festival of Homiletics*, Shannon Johnson Kershner, Preaching the Lesson 2, Luke 9:28-36.

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The transfiguration is a story that acknowledges our liminal spaces, even affirms them. It is a story that reminds us of our mountain tops. It is a story to carry with us as we begin our Lenten journeys and maybe live some liminal spaces, today.

I want to add a footnote to this sermon, before we leave it to begin Lent this year. If we were to keep reading in Luke the next six verses here continue this story. The next verse, begins, 'on the next day'. It is not eight days this time, but only one. The stories are meant to be read together.

What follows immediately on the glory of the transfiguration is a detailed account of the suffering of a father and his son, and how Jesus responds. The father comes out of a crowd of people gathered and pleads with Jesus. "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus heals the boy and the story concludes, 'and all gathered were astounded at the greatness of God.'

God is in this moment too. The glory of God does not come only on the mountain tops. It comes most powerfully and poignantly right here, in our real world, in the suffering, the injustice, the pain, the grief. As clearly as we see God in the dazzling white on the mountain top, and we hear God from the cloud, 'this is my Son, my Chosen' so we know God in the healing presence of Christ, amid the suffering of the world. Jesus leads his disciples back down from the mountain and it is *here* that we see God's glory most clearly. This is what discipleship will mean. On the mountains. In the valleys. in the glorious certainty, and the anxious liminal spaces. God is in all these moments. May we follow, disciples today.