

August 6, 2023  
Feast of the Transfiguration  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Exodus 34:29-35*

*Psalm 99*

*2 Peter 1:13-21*

*Luke 9:28-36*

In the Name of God: whom we worship as Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is an odd day – a day when spiritual events and historic realities collide. Today is the anniversary of when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima in an attempt to end the Second World War. That day, the earth witnessed a light it had never seen before.

Today is also a day when Christians celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration. What we celebrate is the presence of the resurrected and ascended Christ in the midst of his earthly, incarnate life. We stand with the three disciples and witness the infusion of Christ's divine nature with his human body, witnessing light that had never been seen before.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration on a Sunday, something we have done only twice since the year 2000 – in 2006 and 2017 – and will not again until 2028. If you really want to geek out, you can look up all the rules for the Calendar in the Prayer Book (pp. 15ff.), but here's the short version.

While every Sunday is considered a feast of our Lord Jesus Christ, there are three celebrations with fixed dates that take precedence over any Sunday. They are: The Holy Name on January 1, The Presentation on February 2, and The Transfiguration on August 6.

Most of our Protestant siblings remember the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, and we join them in that observance. But today, we join our Catholic and Orthodox siblings in keeping the feast on August 6.<sup>1</sup>

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In the gospel, the two figures who 'appear in glory' with Jesus are Elijah and Moses. Let's consider Elijah. Jews believed that the prophet of the end time would return in the likeness of Elijah, who had disappeared in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11).

Remember in John's gospel when priests and Levites from Jerusalem questioned John the Baptist asking, "are you Elijah?" (John 1:21). And, in Matthew's account of the crucifixion,

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<sup>1</sup> The origins of the feast are cloudy, possibly connected to the dedication of a church on Mt. Tabor, the traditional site of the Transfiguration. A liturgy for Transfiguration was present in various forms by the 9<sup>th</sup> century; but it wasn't until 1456 that it was made a universal feast on August 6 for the Roman Rite by Pope Callixtus III to commemorate the raising of the siege of Belgrade.

some in the crowd said, "Listen, he is calling Elijah" (Matthew 27:47). To this day, at the Passover seder table, an chair is left empty for Elijah.

Early in the Christian experience, the likenesses between Moses and Jesus were emphasized. So, if the readings from Exodus and Luke sound related, it is because their similarity is deliberate. There are details in the Lukan account that are designed to call up ancient memories, to reawaken and refocus the stories of Israel's founding.

Moses received the ten commandments on a mountain, Mt. Sinai, where his experience of God caused his face to shine so brightly that it had to be veiled. Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah were speaking of Jesus' departure. The Greek word that Luke uses is *exodon*, exodus. Just as Moses led an exodus, so too will Jesus go through an exodus in Jerusalem — passing through suffering and death to rise and then ascend to God's right hand.

The writers of the Gospels emphasized that understanding Jesus required understanding Moses. None of this, "well that's the Old Testament God" business for them. The late Anglican spiritual writer Kenneth Leech summed up this emphasis in his book, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*. He wrote that...

... Christian thought came to interpret the redeeming work of Christ in terms of the Exodus story. It was "the manifest intention of the authors of the New Testament to present the mystery of Christ at the time as prolonging ... the great events of Israel's history at the time of Moses." Christian liturgy celebrates the work of Christ by using the symbol of the Exodus [especially in Baptism], and Christian Scriptures use the Exodus as the framework of their teaching.

It is no accident that the theme of the Exodus and Promised Land served as a blueprint in North America, starting with the Puritans and then, by stark contrast, expressions of exodus themes in the context of slavery ("let my people go"), followed by emancipation, the great migration, the civil rights movement, black liberation theology, womanist theology, and all the branches of other liberation movements that will surely follow.

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Let us return to the mountaintop. What does this particular event, the confluence of the past (Moses and Elijah), the present (Jesus), and the future (Peter, James, and John), have to do you with you and me? The Epistle reading from Second Peter reminds us that, in the Transfiguration, "we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed."

But what is the prophetic message? There may be many, but the one I want to think about today is this. Just as Moses led the children of Israel to the promised land, Jesus, the New Moses, will lead God's children to the promised land of life with and in God.

There is, of course, a Greek word for this, too: *theosis*. *Theosis* is a term used in Orthodox theology to refer to the participation of the human person in the life of God. Sometimes it's called deification. It means "being made God" and reflects the dominant Orthodox understanding of salvation in Christ, an understanding that is less common in the West.

Athanasius of Alexandria, who died in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, insisted that God became human so that we might become divine. Humanity and God are understood to be infinitely distant from each other but, in Christ, finite humanity and the infinite God are fully joined.

One of the traditional, but non-prayerbook, prayers that I say when I add water to the wine as I prepare the altar is this: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

The point of all of this information, my friends, the good news for today, is that the union of your particular, created, and beloved human person with God is your Promised Land. The land to which you have been called and to which you have been led by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the New Moses. The Transfiguration is a snapshot, with a really bright flashbulb, of God's story for us – prophecy, fulfillment, and those to carry the story to future generations, all in one frame.

I wonder if that brilliant glimpse of Christ in glory might have been enough to sustain the disciples through the difficult days ahead, especially the darkness of Good Friday. I wonder if this gospel story is enough to sustain us when we face difficult days. Our favorite priest-poet Malcolm Guite has gifted us a poetic imagining of a disciple looking back at the transfiguration while seeing Jesus on the cross on Good Friday.

#### Transfiguration

For that one moment, 'in and out of time',  
On that one mountain where all moments meet,  
The daily veil that covers the sublime  
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.  
There were no angels full of eyes and wings  
Just living glory full of truth and grace.  
The Love that dances at the heart of things  
Shone out upon us from a human face  
And to that light the light in us leaped up,  
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,  
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope  
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.  
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar  
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

As disciples in this day, the Epistle reminds us: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Amen.