

Sermon - Transfiguration ~ Last after Epiphany February 27, 2022

By The Rev. Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell

Holy God, may our reflections on scripture this day inspire us to be strong followers of Jesus in both word and action. Amen.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. Luke 9:28

Jesus grew up in Nazareth. At that time it was just a little hill town in the Northern part of Israel. If you were to walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus did much of his ministry, you would walk directly East. It's about a 7 hour walk - something you could do in a day if it wasn't too hot.

After about 2 hours of walking you would see off to your right a good-sized mountain that rises out of the plain and stands all by itself. Jesus would have walked by this mountain often as he travelled. Today it is called Mt. Tabor, and for centuries the local people have said that this is the mountain that Jesus took Peter, John and James to pray.

14 years ago, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I along with others from Canada drove up to the top of the mountain. Today I'd like to show you some pictures to give you a sense of what it is like...

Pictures

The road up the mountain is full of hairpin turns which the locals like to take at great speed - it gets the adrenaline going. But when you get to the very top the view is stunning. There are groves of olive trees, some gardens and a lovely church. You can look down at the plain in all directions – almost as though you were in the clouds.

9:33 Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"

9:34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

9:35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

In the Church's annual calendar, the story of the Transfiguration comes at the very end of the Epiphany season, a season during which the person of Jesus, is slowly being revealed to the world. We began Epiphany with the visit of the three wisemen.

Immediately our Sunday scripture readings brought us to the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. It is this baptism passage which is the companion story to the Transfiguration.

At Jesus' baptism, the heaven's open, and a voice from heaven speaks to Jesus, and reveals him as the Beloved one, with whom God is pleased. And Jesus begins his ministry.

At the Transfiguration, again the heavens open, again the voice from heaven speaks, this time not only to Jesus, but to the disciples, revealing Jesus as the Chosen, to whom the disciples must listen. And Jesus commits himself to embark on the final path of his ministry. Both stories reveal who Jesus is, and who he will be.

Now we come to, what could be for some, a curious bit. Moses and Elijah. Why are they there? What does it mean? Why do the disciples need to see this?

It is important to remember that the Gospel's first listeners were Jewish. Moses and Elijah are key figures in Judaism.

Both Moses and Elijah, like Jesus, encounter God on a mountain top, Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah on Mount

Carmel; In both of these previous stories they hear the voice of God; the faces of both are illuminated; and, according to Hebrew tradition, both Moses and Elijah are taken up to heaven. Moses represents the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Elijah represents the writings of the Prophets.

So it was important for the disciples – and for the early Church - to recognize that Jesus is the final chapter of this great story. Here on another mountain top it is revealed to them that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the culmination and completion of all that has gone before.

Up to this point, Jesus has been revealing who he is through his teachings and healing ministries as he moves from town to town. But there is something else Jesus needs to reveal to his disciples...When Jesus begins to reveal that suffering and death are also part of who he is, the disciples are unable or unwilling to accept this... Please let it not be so!

This revelation on the mountain top is a gracious gift to the disciples. The presence of Moses and Elijah makes it abundantly clear to the disciples that Jesus is on God's path. This inevitable movement of Jesus toward Jerusalem, and all the events that were to come, is part of who he is. And soon after the Transfiguration, we read –

for the first of several times – *“and Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.”*

Thus at the end of this season, as we head into Lent, we come to the last of the epiphanies. God, in Jesus, prepares to accomplish something completely new, *the ultimate revelation of divine love through death and resurrection.*

The disciples will *“soon face conditions that will seem to derail, if not bring to an end, their hope in Jesus.”*

The Transfiguration is one of the ways the disciples – and the early Church - know that what is unfolding is not thwarting God’s purposes, but is actually part of God’s plan. That they must listen to what Jesus is saying, that they must accept the path Jesus is taking toward Jerusalem.

“In due time, after the resurrection, they will remember and understand, and not feel heavy. In fact they will tell it broadly as good news.”

The memory and the telling of the Transfiguration will remind the disciples, and the early church facing dark and desperate times, of a vision of God in Jesus Christ beyond where they are. It reminds them of hope and possibility, and gives them a vision for the future, and the strength, courage and sense of purpose to move forward.

Like the disciples of long ago, you and I are called to bring hope to our generation. We are Jesus' disciples in our generation. Through our baptism, we ourselves have been transfigured. We are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

We too are called to heal, to teach and yes, sometimes even suffer. We are called to help everyone see that they are Beloved and Chosen ones by a loving God. A God who sees in us more than we can ask or imagine.

Amen.