

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration Sunday

My reflection today was meant to include thoughts on both the Epistle and the Gospel readings from the lectionary today. It did just that. However, you will notice that today I have only read the gospel. The first sentence of the reading from 2 Corinthians was this: Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness.

Since then, we have such a hope we act with great boldness. Church, it was with boldness, or perhaps foolishness, that I deleted that sermon after stewing with dissatisfaction all Saturday in the wee hours of this morning and prayed for words more urgent than my own. Words that carried the urgency of a Sunday morning where we celebrate the mysterious Transfiguration of the body of Jesus and God's revelation of his Son's divinity. I found those words in ones that I borrowed and amended from another scholar and minister, Keith Anderson. I share from an essay written by him in 2015 entitled "Forsaking the Whiteness of the Transfiguration".

In the story of Transfiguration, we find Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, on a high mountaintop. There, Jesus is transfigured--changed in appearance, becoming "dazzlingly white". The great lawgiver, Moses, and prophet Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. The disciples are overwhelmed by this vision. Not knowing what to do or say, they blurt out a suggestion to build three dwelling places. Let's stay here, they say and memorialize this moment.

As soon as they propose this, the vision ends, God declares Jesus to be God's beloved Son, instructs them to listen to him, and they head back down the mountain.

The disciples' response to Jesus' Transfiguration was completely understandable. Who could blame them for wanting to linger on the mountaintop after such a revelation? There are plenty of examples in the Bible of people building monuments and altars at places of divine encounter. But perhaps there is more to it than that. Maybe they wanted to stay on the mountain, at least in part, to retreat from the clamouring crowds down below. Before ascending the mountain, they had been present to Jesus' healing and teaching, his stilling a storm, raising a little girl from the dead, feeding thousands, and walking on water. It's not hard to imagine that the Transfiguration--which would have been far more striking and miraculous even than all of those--was the seeming culmination of those saving acts and the reward for wading through the endless human brokenness and need. At the very least, it was a respite from the heartbreaking human longing that awaited them back down the mountain.

Here, I think, the disciples reflect our own instinctual withdrawal from the world in the face of its seemingly unquenchable need and news of war, natural disaster, and racial strife. (Though it should be noted that only those with privilege can, in fact, retreat.) As part of that instinct, we can also draw back into our familiar and seemingly safe ethnic enclaves, making it even more challenging to understand and appreciate the plight of our neighbours.

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And sure enough, when Jesus and the disciples trudged back down the mountain, they found a world in turmoil: scribes arguing, an anxious crowd surging toward him, and a mother presenting her possessed son for healing.

However, this central problem with the disciples' desire to stay: they misunderstood and mistook the Transfiguration for the definitive revelation of God in Jesus. This was a great moment, to be sure, one of the inflexion points in the story of Jesus, but God's ultimate revelation was still to come in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. That is where God's love and power would be entirely on display--not in self-preservation or self-aggrandizement, not in glory or dazzling whiteness, but self-emptying, in solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering. Perhaps this is why the only thing Jesus says in this entire text is an instruction to the disciples not to tell anyone about the mountaintop event until after his resurrection--so that others wouldn't make the same mistake.

And Jesus wastes no time getting there. After his Transfiguration, he quickly heads down the mountain and, in a short time, to the cross. In doing so, Jesus rejects the "whiteness" of the Transfiguration and presses into the sea of human need--humanity in all its diversity and fullness--by descending the mountain and setting his face toward Jerusalem. Jesus constantly refuses the way of privilege, even though he was entitled to every possible privilege as God's beloved Son. And he nailed that privilege to the cross for the sake of the poor, the weak, the disenfranchised, for us all.

Jesus may have transfigured on the mountain, but he and the disciples and the crowds were transformed in the valley, redeemed by the suffering on the cross, and finally triumphant over sin and death.

Like Lazarus, Jesus' call to follow him is a call to come out of the racial enclaves that appear to us as safe-havens but are in actuality only tombs. He calls us to be with our neighbours, listen, and show mercy. Jesus calls the privileged to follow his example--to lay down that privilege for the sake of our neighbours and for the good of the world.

This is the Jesus of whom God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" May it be so. Amen.

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