

“Be Still and Listen!”
March 2, 2025
Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

Every year at this time we hear the story of the Transfiguration. It occurs in our lectionary on the last Sunday before the season of Lent. There’s a reason for placing it on this Sunday. This story uses language that foreshadows the resurrection stories in the gospels. In fact, some scholars have wondered if this might have been a resurrection story originally that the writer of Mark’s gospel re-worked to create this Transfiguration account. For the Church, by hearing this story just before we begin our journey to Good Friday and Easter, the Transfiguration offers hope for what’s coming. So, we can enter Lent without a sense of dread about the future but with resurrection always in view.

But the church’s use of this story isn’t necessarily the same as the gospel writers’. There are elements in this story that have nothing to do at all with resurrection and we shouldn’t overlook that. One of them is the presence of Moses and Elijah. Why, of all the figures from scripture who might be there, are these two chosen? We just heard a story about Moses and his experience on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law and how he was affected by his encounters with God. Being in the presence of God caused Moses’ face to “shine,” we’re told. He came away from the mountain with an otherworldly glow that made the people fearful. Had Moses been transformed into something new by speaking with God? We’re not told that he has, but the people around him may have thought so. At the very least, Moses was imbued with an awareness of God’s power and glory and somehow that was expressed through him physically.

Moses, of course, was the giver of the Law, the Torah, for Israel. He represents the very foundation of their tradition. His presence with Jesus on the mountaintop may be a way of rooting Jesus in that tradition. Jesus doesn’t come to overrule the Torah, but to carry it forward into a new era of understanding. Elijah’s presence may be a way to place Jesus in the tradition of the prophets. Elijah is considered the herald of the Messiah in Jewish tradition. He represents the enduring words of the prophets in every age. The tradition around him, you might remember, is that he didn’t die, but was taken up to God in a fiery chariot to return when the Messiah arrives. Elijah is remembered at Passover meals by setting a place for him and opening the door so he can join in celebrating the deliverance of God’s people.

Luke tells us these two were on the mountain with Jesus discussing his “departure,” a word in English that translates the Greek word *exodos*. So, you can see how this experience is closely related to the story of deliverance and liberation that every Jewish person knows and turns to in times of fear and uncertainty. What I think Luke wants to convey in this moment when Jesus is setting his face toward Jerusalem and crucifixion is the promise of deliverance Jesus represents. The disciples are being offered a chance to see where all his teachings and healings are leading; that no matter what lies ahead their history with God will keep them rooted in the hope of liberation and justice.

But there’s also another layer of meaning to this story that’s worth exploring. The clue to it is found in the opening words of this passage: “About eight days after Jesus said these

things...” What are the “things” being referred to? Just prior to this story in Luke’s gospel Jesus has been telling his disciples about what following him requires. He says, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them. What advantage do people have if they gain the whole world for themselves yet perish or lose their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.. I assure you that some standing here won’t die before they see God’s kingdom.”

Those words offer a challenge, a promise and for many who read them then and who read them today, a puzzle. If we think about them too long they can fill us with anxiety. What does it mean to lose my life for Jesus’ sake? What am I risking by taking up the cross daily? Jesus is challenging his followers to accept a life of sacrifice and compassion. That was no easier to do in their day than it is in ours. And when we look at our lives and what’s important to us, it’s hard to say we are really living up to his challenge. Discipleship is costly. And it’s hard not to feel anxious about our capacity to accept it.

The disciples who go with Jesus up that mountain, like all of us, were filled with anxiety. They couldn’t possibly have known the depth of commitment Jesus was asking of them. When we are anxious our thoughts become muddled and our actions frozen. For Peter, James and John, falling asleep was a way of coping with it. And when they came to and saw what was happening, all Peter could do was babble incoherently about building shelters. God’s voice, cutting him off, was a command to shut up and listen. The remedy to anxiety is to be still, to control the barrage of wild thoughts and fears, take a deep breath and listen.

For us today that’s a hard lesson to learn. We get caught up in the frenzy of busy-ness to keep ourselves occupied when we’re anxious. If we’d been there we would have started laying out plans for the shelters and run around gathering materials. We might have jumped on Facebook or X or Instagram to post a picture and a selfie, made Moses and Elijah line up next to Jesus so we could capture the moment forever. We’d have done anything but stop and be still. We’re invited, commanded really, on that mountain to listen and release our anxiety and fear.

When we listen we can hear Jesus’ words calling us across the eons to follow him into a life of compassion and generosity. He calls us to let go of our fears for the future, no matter how justified they might be, and walk the path of compassion, the way of the cross. That means identifying with the vulnerable of this world and not with the strong. It means defying the forces around us that want to divide and condemn and seek unity and acceptance. His transfiguration reveals the reality behind what can be seen, the glory that lies beneath his sacrifice and by accompanying him on that mountain with Peter, James and John, we enter his glory and are transfigured along with him. By taking up our cross daily we share in his sacrifice and are made new in God’s presence.

But we can’t do that if we’re overwhelmed with anxiety and fear. We can’t allow the voices of hatred and intolerance and retribution to drown out the voice of God calling us to listen. Christ is present for his disciples in a unique way on that mountain. The glory revealed in him is the promise of resurrection and new life. It’s the assurance of his words that by losing our

life for his sake, we will save it. If we are willing to be still and listen to his voice, we can follow him without fear and see God's kingdom unveil right in front of us and all around us. For that kingdom is in you. The shining glory of God's presence is in you. The anxiety and uncertainty of our time is no match for God's glory revealed through us. So long as we remain true to Christ's call to follow him no matter what the cost, we will overcome the forces of fear and hatred and let God's light shine for all to see.

Amen