

"Vision and Teaching"
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
11 February 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

II Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
II Corinthians 4:3-6
St. Mark 9:2-9

INI

Moses and Elijah

Although The Feast of the Transfiguration is celebrated on our calendar on 6 August, none-the-less its readings end on the Last Sunday of the Epiphany, one of the traditional days on which this feast was celebrated, and still is in Lutheran Churches. In it we meet Moses and Elijah, and we should take some time to think about why they appear in this story.

So then, why do these two appear at the Transfiguration of Jesus? There are multiple reasons, but the simplest and most elegant reason is that both sought to see the face of God, much like what happens to Peter, James, and John in today's Gospel reading. Moses requests such in Exodus 33:18-23, when on Sinai he asks God "to show me your glory." Moses had other opportunities to encounter God, especially the conversation at the Burning Bush when he receives his commission from God and learns God's name. That should have been enough. To know the name granted Moses a certain amount of power and experience. Now however, following the giving of the Law, Moses wants to be certain that YHWH will continue to accompany not only him, but the nation chosen by God. Moses puts it succinctly, "Now, if I have found favor with you, please let me know your ways so that, in knowing you, I may continue to find favor with you." The relationship required not only knowledge of the name, but recognition of the face as well. God shields Moses from such glory with the palm of God's hand, as Moses hides in the cleft of a rock.

Elijah seeks God for other reasons. Having confronted the rule of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah flees for his life, and does something that is really quite important, and influential, I think, in the life of Jesus. He goes to the wilderness, which we have talked about recently. There he rests and is refreshed and continues on in his reverse pilgrimage (forty days and forty nights) to Horeb, the mountain of God. In a way, Elisha is reversing Israel's experience, going back to the very first things – rebooting the situation, if you will. There is shelter in a cave, and a question from God, "Why are you here?" After a rehearsal of all that he has done for God, Elijah expects a further experience and knowledge of God. God promises to pass by. The experience of a strong and violent wind says nothing. The rending of mountains and rocks says nothing. A

subsequent earthquake is silent in spite of its tremors. Finally, there was the experience, a sound of minute stillness, or a light silent sound.

Both men experience the full spectrum of experience with God. Both men are called to be prophets, announcing God's will and way to the present situation. Both men stand with Jesus, the ultimate Word from God, and finally witness God's glory in the flesh. It is a promise fulfilled, and a promise made in ancient times that is made available to humankind as a whole. Moses and Elijah are indeed prophets, but equally important is their humanity and presence.

The Experience on the mountain top

Even though it is not included in the reading, please do not forget the sentence that Mark uses to introduce us to the story of the Transfiguration: "He also said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power.'" With that in mind we, like Moses and Elijah, are prepared to witness the theophany that we know as the Transfiguration.

We are aware, through the Scriptures, of others who were transfigured in this world, Enoch and Moses. Here, however, the transfiguration of Jesus is a revelation to his intimates, Peter, James, and John. And, for Mark, it is a message to those who follow Jesus as well. As Jesus changes, so Paul saw the life of the individual Christian changing as well, "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit." So the Transfiguration story is not only of an event and those who witnessed it but a commentary as well on what Christians would become.

The story is seen through Easter eyes, and eyes that have read the ancient Scriptures. "*After six days*" is an unusual beginning, and we wonder what its import is. Perhaps it reflects the story of Moses and the seventy elders who see the God of Israel ([Exodus 24:9-11](#)), or perhaps it represents the last day of a new creation in which the Son of Man is made manifest to us. It connects the anticipated story of Jesus (for this story will be followed soon enough by a Passion Prediction) with the known story of ancient revelations. Thus, it is natural for Moses and Elijah to be present for they are seeing the fulfilled vision. It is also natural for Peter, James, and John, to be there, for the kingdom had already been revealed to them, and now its fulfillment was the vision for their eyes. They are being made ready to lead those who would form the church.

They, however, are not ready. Peter misunderstands and wants to remain there taking in the glory. This, however, was preceded with fear, terror and speechlessness. Peter does understand one thing, however, and that was that this experience was to be a learning for them, for he calls Jesus, Teacher or Rabbi. Once again, the Voice addresses those witnessing the scene. Unlike the Baptism of Jesus when the Voice seems to be internal, here it is evident to all. "*This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.*" And then it is all over, and then it begins again!

Coming down from the mountain

Have you ever been on a retreat, or a vacation, where you had to reenter daily life and its circumstances. It is a difficult thing, with the glories of our time away from life and society committed solely to our memory. Jesus asks the three not to share what they have seen until "when the Son of Man had risen from the dead." This gives them and us a clue what is to follow in the wake of this Vision. Wednesday, we will enter Lent, and with it its privations, and introspection. We will be alone in a peculiar and particular kind of wilderness, preparing ourselves for Holy Week, for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter. However, before all of this we need to ruminate on the Vision, on what we have seen and experienced on the mountain top. It is not that Jesus wishes to silence us, but rather that he wants to give us the gift of silence, wisdom, and understanding. It is a wish list for us to experience during the coming Lent. In the second lesson for this Sunday, Paul reminds us of what to expect in the wilderness of Lent. "*Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* So my prayer for all of us is that we wait out in the privacy and wilderness of our own Lent, anticipating the appearance and vision of Christ – given for us and for all people. A gracious and fulfilling Lent be available to all of you.

SDG