

August 6, 2017
The Transfiguration of our Lord
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalms 99:5-9
2 Peter 1:13-21
Luke 9:28-36

August 6th marks our annual Feast Day of The Transfiguration of our Lord. Today's passage from Luke appears, as well, in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, with only subtle variations. And one version or another of the Transfiguration story is always read on the last Sunday of Epiphany—the season of light, the season of God's self-revelation in Jesus—a Sunday when several Protestant denominations also recognize the Transfiguration. All of which should signal THIS IS AN IMPORTANT STORY, even in all its peculiarity—maybe especially because of its peculiarity. The Transfiguration is a mystery, to be sure. It is a resurrection story of sorts—a prelude—maybe (in Hollywood terms) a resurrection prequel.

During the previous eight days prior to today's reading, Jesus has been trying to explain his impending fate to the twelve disciples who, of course, aren't quite getting it. Why would they? How could they comprehend what we read a few verses earlier in Luke (chapter 9), “[Jesus] sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, ‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’” (Lk. 9: 21-22) That all sounds as incomprehensible in the 21st c. as it must have sounded 2000 years ago, even with the Jesus the disciples knew standing right in front of them saying these things.

That Transfiguration evening on the mountain, we have no way of knowing who initiated the mysterious sighting of a glowing Jesus in conversation with the spirits of the long-since-departed Moses and Elijah. Luke says, “Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they [the three disciples] saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.”

What had Jesus just prayed for, or prayed about? Might he have asked God to help the disciples' understand in advance what would soon happen in Jerusalem? Or, did Jesus, himself, have the divine ability to initiate his own transcendent appearance and summon the spirits of Moses and Elijah for conversation? John's Gospel would say Jesus, divine from “the beginning,” certainly had the capability to initiate this vision, but John is the only Gospel writer who does not offer us a version of the Transfiguration story.

Maybe, since the disciples at large have not understood Jesus' direct foretelling of his suffering, rejection, murder, and resurrection, he takes the cream of the crop—Peter, John, and James—and employs Hebrew scripture and tradition to make his point, showing the three his own radiant image in the company of the visible and hallowed spirits of Moses and Elijah. It seems reasonable for Jesus (and for us) to expect Jewish young men of the day to have heard the Moses and Elijah stories growing up.

There is, of course, the whole of the Moses story—not just today's passage from Exodus about Moses having been the only known human being to have had actual in-person audiences with God—and Moses' coming away from those experiences glowing in radiance. There are also the mysterious circumstances of Moses' death. Deuteronomy says, “[Moses] was buried in a valley in the land of Moab...but no one knows his burial place to this day.” (Deut. 34:6) The keeping of a burial site a secret is unique in scripture, and because of the unusual nature of an unknown grave, there is rabbinic argument that Moses ascended to into heaven, Elijah-style, without actually having died (even though Deuteronomy seems pretty clear Moses died and was buried somewhere in the Moab valley). The prophet Elijah, you will remember, was said to left his earthly life ascending in a whirlwind riding in a chariot of fire up into the clouds—no death, no grave. There will not be exact Jesus end-of-life parallels with either Moses or Elijah—Jesus will endure a gruesome death and will occupy a known grave location—at least temporarily. This, then, may be a prophetic vision of Jesus as fulfillment of the law in Moses, and the prophets in Elijah.

Peter, notorious for misreading virtually every Jesus message, asks if he, John, and James should build dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah; they are sleepy, and maybe it is getting dark. Not for the first time, Peter is brought up short. This time Peter's question is answered not by Jesus, but by God in the form of a terrifying voice that comes out of a cloud, darkness indeed suddenly overshadowing them: “‘This is my Son, my Chosen; *listen* to him!’” And then, there is the secrecy.

Overall Gospel depictions of just who Jesus is, are complicated by a paradox of secrecy versus publicity, making it difficult for the disciples, for individuals and crowds in their midst, and (now 2,000 years later) making it difficult for us to know just what to believe about this Jesus. On one hand he teaches through cryptic parables and insists on silence and secrecy about many of his exorcisms and miraculous healings. And yet, there are multiple instances of public displays of his divine actions and outright demonstrations he, indeed, has messianic characteristics.

The Transfiguration story falls into the category of a secret not to be shared—at least not immediately, by witnesses Peter, John and James. All three Gospel accounts of this story end consistently, with a call for silence about what happened during prayer with Jesus that evening on the mountain. Luke ends the story with the words, “And they [Peter, John and James] kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.” Mark and Matthew both indicate Jesus actually orders the three to “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Mt. 17:9)

Well, it is probably wise for the three of them to keep this event to themselves...for now. Jesus and the disciples already have credibility issues. If the three were to leave here and share the account of this vision, who in the world would believe them? Exactly, no one.

No doubt, all have us, at one time, have endured the experience of someone not believing a personal life-story that we knew (and maybe still know) to have been absolutely true. I vividly remember, at the age of 5, riding in what we called “the way back” of my Uncle Johnny’s station wagon along with my sister and three cousins, all of them between three and seven years older than I was. Some of us may remember when nobody knew from seatbelts and all the kids just piled into the backend of the car. That was us.

It was dark outside and drizzling a little. I happened to look out the front passenger-side window over my Aunt Caroline’s shoulder. Something was very wrong with the rearview mirror, but I couldn’t figure out exactly why it looked so strange until we stopped at a traffic light under a street lamp. Lo and behold, the round piece of mirror glass had slid out of its chrome rim, and the glass was just barely balancing on the lower edge of the frame, rocking slightly (up and down) like a see-saw. I couldn’t take my eyes off it, expecting the glass would crash onto the street any second. I also could not speak. I so wanted to shout, “Hey everybody, somebody, look at the mirror; it’s come apart and it is going to fall and break!” I think I was somehow paralyzed with fear that the mirror was going to break. (I knew all about the seven-years of bad luck superstition.) I had fear that my eyes were playing tricks on me, and (probably, most of all) fear I was wrong and would be teased (yet again) for my 5-year-old imagination. Thank goodness someone else in the car finally noticed and they had the courage not to keep silent. The mirror was rescued.

When we are little children everything seems proportionally bigger than we are, and even simple fears can take on mammoth proportions. The disciples we read about were less than five years into their experience of Jesus—toddlers in their faith life. They were living in a frequently violent world of cultural oppression and religious persecution; And, of course they would have been afraid. Sharing stories of a messianic figure, divine visions, and bodily resurrection likely would have meant risking their lives. For the disciples, and (a generation later) the Gospel writers and Paul, along with their infant faith communities, there was legitimate fear of consequence for sharing the Jesus stories. Credibility was important. Having credible witnesses was important. Sharing the story of the Transfiguration vision would have its proper time, and place, and audience.

As it turns out, multiple people witness the post-crucifixion resurrected Jesus—not just the three in his inner-most circle: All twelve of the disciples, Mary Magdalene, Mary (his mother), Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus road, and whoever else, unbeknownst to us, may have been cloistered with them in the upper room.

While Jesus may have told them not to tell what they had seen on the mountain, for now, Peter, John, and James had the affirmation from one another that what they had seen and heard in the cloud was all real. And their further confirmation would come in the multiple post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, when, finally, they would all understand what Jesus had been trying to tell them, whether or not they could ever make any sense of it. Two Thousand years later, the challenge remains much the same. As 21st c. Christian people, we are mightily challenged: first to believe, ourselves, and then to accept the Gospel call, without fear; not to keep silence, but to continue to tell these compelling Jesus stories that, however implausible, grab ahold of us, timelessly beckon, and just will not let us go.