

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*A cloud appeared, and covered them,
 and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.*

*A voice came from the cloud, saying,
 “This is my Son, whom I have chosen;
 listen to him!”*

(Luke 9.34-35)

Let us worship God.

HYMN: Fairest Lord Jesus ...

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

God of majesty and glory:

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we remember how your glory was revealed momentarily in the person of Jesus, manifesting to his disciples his true identity as your Son. As Jesus went up the mountain to commune with you in prayer, we come into your presence now to listen for your message to us, and to bring you our thanks and our concerns.

We confess, however, that, even though we draw close to you in worship, we so quickly revert to our old ways again afterward. We so easily forget the values and principles you teach us, and go back to living by our instincts. We so easily lose sight of what you desire, and focus our attention instead on what we ourselves desire. Although you call us to be distinct as your people, we feel most comfortable being just like the people around us.

In spite of our best intentions, then, we keep falling back into sinful ways; and so we ask for your forgiveness. We ask also for the help of the Holy Spirit, to be transformed more and more into the kind of people you want us to be — people who resemble Jesus in our attitudes and actions.

We pray in Jesus’ name; and we pray together now, as he taught us:

THE LORD’S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus,
 and, through him, to reconcile all people to himself,
 by making peace through his blood,
 shed on the cross.*

(Colossians 1.19-20, ad.)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
 let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **OT Reading:** Exodus 34.27-35 - The shining face of Moses

In this reading, the people of Israel are camped at Mount Sinai, after having left Egypt, where they had been living in slavery.

Moses has gone up the mountain to receive the Law from God, and now he comes back down to rejoin the rest of the people.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 99 - “The LORD reigns!”

Psalm 99 is a so-called “enthronement” psalm, celebrating God’s kingship over both Israel and the world as a whole.

It speaks of both God’s concern for justice, and his faithfulness to his people.

The reference to Moses ties in with today’s other three readings.

The reference to God’s “holy mountain” in the final verse means the temple in Jerusalem, which was built on Mount Zion.

- **Letter Reading:** 2 Corinthians 3.7-18 - The shining face of Moses

In this reading, Paul argues that the new covenant between God and humanity, which God has established through Jesus, is superior to the old covenant, which God had established through Moses.

In the course of his discussion, Paul refers to the story in today’s Old Testament reading — the story of Moses’ shining face.

- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 9.28-43a - The transfiguration of Jesus

This reading is Luke’s account of the transfiguration of Jesus. It comes right after the story in which Jesus predicts his death for the first time.

HYMN: Lord, the light of your love is shining

SERMON: “The Real Jesus”

On this final Sunday of the Season after Epiphany each year, we read and reflect on the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. It’s found in all three of the so-called “Synoptic” Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that is — but not in the Gospel of John. This year, we’re looking at Luke’s account.

The story of the transfiguration is told quite similarly by all three Gospel writers, although each one includes details that are unique to his own account. In all three Gospels also, the transfiguration story is sandwiched between two other stories. Preceding it is the story in which Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is, to which Peter answers “the Messiah”; and in which Jesus then predicts for the first time that he will be rejected by the religious authorities,

be put to death, and then be raised to life on the third day. Following the transfiguration is the story in which Jesus heals a boy who is possessed by an unclean spirit, something that the nine disciples who had stayed behind at the foot of the mountain had been unable to do.

Since we look at the story of Jesus' transfiguration every year, it's quite a familiar story. It's worth noting the details that are unique to Luke's account, then.

The first of these is the fact that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him specifically to pray, and that it is while he is praying that the transfiguration takes place. This is in keeping with Luke's emphasis on Jesus' prayer life. He depicts Jesus at prayer more often than the other three Gospel writers do. You may recall, for example, that in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, Jesus prays after he has been baptized, and that the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and the voice of God speaks, as he is praying.

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke doesn't use the word "transfigured" in speaking of the change that takes place in Jesus' appearance. He says simply that the appearance of Jesus' face "changed" (Luke 9.29); and, like Matthew and Mark, he says that Jesus' clothes turned a bright white (9.29). It's only Matthew who says that Jesus' face "shone" (Matthew 17.2).

As in the other two accounts, Luke speaks of the mysterious appearance of the Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah, although Luke alone uses the word "glory" in connection with their appearance (Luke 9.30). Here too, Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus, although Luke alone tells us what they talked about. Luke says, *They spoke about his departure, which he was to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem* (Luke 9.31). Interestingly, the Greek word that Luke uses for "departure" is the word *exodos* — or "exodus", as we pronounce it in English. That word, of course, brings to mind the story of the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt and their trek to the Promised Land — which was God's greatest saving act in the Old Testament. Luke's use of this word in today's reading hints that Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem will be another great saving act of God.

Another detail unique to Luke is the fact that the three disciples get sleepy. Whether they actually fall asleep, and then wake up to see the transfiguration in progress, or whether they were just sleepy isn't entirely clear. However, it foreshadows the fact that those same three disciples will fall asleep while Jesus is praying at another time — when he prays in Gethsemane, shortly before he is arrested. Here again, Luke uses the word "glory", a word that Matthew and Mark don't use. He says of the disciples, *when they became fully awake, they saw [Jesus'] glory, and the two men standing with him* (Luke 9.32).

As in the other two accounts, Peter offers to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Luke adds the comment, *He did not know what he was saying* (Luke 9.33). As in the other accounts also, Peter is interrupted by the appearance of a cloud. However, Luke alone says that the cloud enveloped them. He says of the disciples, *they were afraid as they entered the cloud* (Luke 9.4).

The voice that speaks from the cloud — clearly the voice of God — identifies Jesus as his Son;

although rather than saying “This is my Son, whom I *love*” as in Matthew and Mark, the voice here says *This is my Son, whom I have chosen* (Luke 9.35). Then, just as in the other two accounts, the voice from the cloud adds the command, *Listen to him!* (Luke 9.35).

At that point, presumably, the transfiguration ends as abruptly as it had started. Luke says, *When the voice had spoken, they [the three disciples, that is] found that Jesus was alone* (Luke 9.36).

Luke’s version of the story concludes with the disciples keeping quiet about what they had witnessed, whereas in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus *tells* them not to tell anyone what they have witnessed. Luke says, *The disciples kept this to themselves, and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen* (Luke 9.36).

This year, the lectionary has us look also at the story that comes next: the story of an exorcism done by Jesus when he and the three disciples have come back down the mountain. After the strange story of the transfiguration, we feel like we’re again in familiar territory, as we see Jesus do another miraculous healing.

The person needing healing is a boy who’s brought to Jesus by his father. The father tells Jesus that the boy is possessed by a spirit, although the symptoms he describes sound a lot like epilepsy to us 21st-Century readers. The father says he had asked the disciples who had not gone up the mountain with Jesus to drive the spirit out, but that they were unable to do so. As the boy is brought to Jesus, he has what appears to be a *grand mal* epileptic seizure, before Jesus heals him, and gives him back to his father.

Before going any further, I’d like to comment briefly on the picture on the screen that I chose to accompany today’s sermon. It’s a painting by the famous Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. As you can see, he shows two scenes in the one picture — both the transfiguration at the top of the mountain and the disciples at the foot of the mountain encountering the boy who’s possessed by the unclean spirit. In order to do this, the artist has made the mountain so small that it doesn’t look like a mountain at all!

In the transfiguration scene at the top, Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah, although I have no idea why the artist has shown them floating in the air; that’s not what the text says. On the ground directly below Jesus are the three disciples — Peter, James, and John. Whether this is what the transfiguration actually looked like is anyone’s guess, of course.

At the bottom of the picture are the boy with the unclean spirit and his father, along with some other people. They’re on the right side of the picture, while on the left are the nine disciples whom Jesus had left below when he took Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him.

Well, what are we to make of these two stories? What do they teach us?

The transfiguration itself is a revelation of Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God. The fact that he is the Son of God is no surprise to us, of course, but, in Luke’s Gospel, as well as in Mat-

threw and Mark, this is something that the people around Jesus didn't know, not even the disciples. It was something that had to be revealed to them, and Jesus seems to have chosen this way to do it.

In the story that immediately precedes the transfiguration story, the disciples learn for the first time that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. In the transfiguration, then, they find out that Jesus is also the Son of God. The story is thus an “epiphany” — an event in which Jesus' true identity is “manifested” or revealed. In fact, it reminds us of Jesus' baptism, at which God, speaking from heaven, also identified Jesus as his Son. In the transfiguration, then, the disciples are given a brief glimpse of the real Jesus — Jesus as he really is, in all his heavenly glory — before his appearance returns to normal, and he once again looks like a run-of-the-mill human being. Not all the disciples are privy to this revelation, however; just Peter, James, and John — the three men who appear to form the inner circle of the Twelve.

It's not surprising that the transfiguration should have happened on a mountain. In the ancient world, mountains were seen as being kind-of a half-way point between earth and heaven. This is true also in the story of Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai, at the time of Moses. In the book of Exodus, Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to receive the law from God, and goes down the mountain to take the law to the people, camped at the base of the mountain. Indeed, Moses goes up and down the mountain a number of times during those chapters in Exodus.

Today's Old Testament reading comes after the golden calf incident, in which the Israelites had offered sacrifices to a golden calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai. During that incident, Moses, in anger, had smashed the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been written. In today's reading, then, he receives a second copy of the Ten Commandments, as it were, which he takes down the mountain with him.

An interesting detail in the story is the fact that Moses' face shone after his encounter with God on the mountain. What this means is that his face reflected the glory of God. Glory is an attribute of God that is usually described as light — bright light. It appears that the same phenomenon happened in the transfiguration, although Luke doesn't specifically say anything about Jesus' face shining. However, he does use the word “glory”. In fact, he uses it twice — once in referring to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and once in referring to the appearance of Jesus.

According to the story in Exodus, Moses' shining face scared the Israelites, so that he had to cover his face with a veil. In today's reading from the Letters, the apostle Paul imagines that the glorious appearance of Moses' face gradually faded back to normal, and that Moses wore the veil in order to keep the Israelites from seeing the glory fading from his face. However, the story in Exodus doesn't say that.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration seems to emphasize that Jesus' ministry was in continuity with the Old Testament. Moses, of course, was the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt and to the border of the Promised Land, and through whom God estab-

lished a formal covenant relationship with the people of Israel. Elijah was one of Israel's earliest prophets. He campaigned to get the Israelites of his day to give up the worship of foreign gods, and to worship Yahweh, their own God, exclusively — as is commanded in the first of the Ten Commandments. Although Elijah didn't leave behind a body of written work, such as Isaiah did, for example, the stories about him and his ministry were fondly remembered by the people of Israel.

In the transfiguration, then, Jesus' true identity was revealed to the disciples Peter, James, and John. The revelation was both visual — the change in Jesus' appearance and the appearance of Moses and Elijah — and auditory — the voice of God speaking from the cloud. If they didn't understand the meaning of what they saw, they certainly would've understood the meaning of what they heard. They now realized that there was much more to Jesus than they had previously thought. They now realized that Jesus was a person of much greater authority than they had ever imagined.

Yet, the experience quickly passed, and things soon returned to normal. Jesus and the three disciples went back down the mountain, and were once again confronted by a person in distress who needed Jesus' help. And Jesus gave that man and his son the help they were seeking. He resumed the ministry of teaching and healing that he had been doing prior to his transfiguration.

Soon afterward, Jesus would begin his fateful journey to Jerusalem — the one that would end in his arrest, execution, and resurrection, as he had already predicted. That journey begins in the same chapter of Luke as today's reading. At verse 51 of that chapter, Luke tells us, *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (Luke 9.51). Perhaps the experience of the transfiguration was partially for his own benefit, as well as that of his disciples. Perhaps it served to encourage and strengthen him as he faced the most difficult part of his ministry.

For us, perhaps, the transfiguration underscores not only Jesus' true identity as the Son of God, but also his authority as such. After all, God said not only, *This is my Son, whom I have chosen*, but also, *Listen to him!* (Luke 9.35). The words Jesus spoke he spoke with the full authority of God, and if we disregard his teaching, we do so at our peril.

In preparing this sermon, I've struggled to make a connection between the transfiguration story and the horror that is currently unfolding in Ukraine, and found it hard to find one. I've wondered if I should preach on the transfiguration at all today, and whether doing so would sound irrelevant in light of this new crisis in which the world finds itself.

Perhaps the connection is that there is an authority that exceeds all earthly authority, to which we are all accountable. We human beings may do what we want, and may get away with it for a while; but in the end, we are subject to God's authority, whether we realize it or not, and whether we like it or not. What the Russians under Vladimir Putin are doing is clearly

wrong, and needs to be resisted. At the same time, the people of Ukraine need to be supported and given the aid and assistance they need — not only to preserve their freedom and independence, but also to provide the necessities of life, both to those who have been forced to flee for their safety, and those who have no choice but to stay where they are and face whatever may come. May we in the so-called “West” not abandon them in their time of need, then, but stand with them, and provide everything we can to assist them.

HYMN: Jesus on the mountain peak ...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE *[see separate document]*

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Gracious and faithful God:

We give you thanks for giving us a glimpse of yourself in the person and life of Jesus. We thank you, too, that Jesus went on from the mountain of transfiguration to give himself for us on the cross, so that we could be reconciled to you, and adopted into your family.

In gratitude, we now present this offering to you, as part of our service for you. Use it, we pray, to strengthen the work that your church does in your name — here in our own congregation, across the country, and around the world.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

HYMN: We have come at Christ’s own bidding

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,
 in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,
 to continue your daily service for God
 in the midst of everyday life.

And may God bless you:

May he guide and inspire you in everything you do,
 and may he equip and strengthen you for the tasks he gives you;
 in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.