

**Sermon, Feast of the Transfiguration      Trinity Collinsville    August 6, 2017**  
**Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36**  
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Sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when all Christianity was still one Catholic Church, in one of the monastic settlements in the deserts of Egypt, Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can, I say the daily office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?”

Then the old man, Abba Joseph, stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 1981:103.7)

In the book of the Exodus, God tells Moses to come up onto Mount Sinai. He instructs Moses to come alone. The mountain is dangerous when God is there. Moses is to let no one else come with him, or to even touch the mountain, not even the livestock are to touch the mountain while Moses is there with God. In fact, a fence is built around the mountain to protect everyone.

This is Moses’ second visit to God on the mountain. The first time Moses went up, he received the two stone tablets of the ten commandments, but he destroyed them when he saw the people had reverted to idol worship during the forty days of Moses’s absence.

Now he returns to the mountain to get replacement tablets, but this time he doesn’t just *talk* with God. Moses is allowed to *see* the *glory* of God. Not God’s face, of course, just God’s back as God passes in front of Moses. But this is enough to make Moses’s face shine. In fact, it shines so much that the people can’t look at him. So Moses goes around with a veil over his face. From then on, every time Moses enters the Tent of Meeting to pray, to talk with God, he reveals his face so the people can see it shining, the proof that what he was about to tell them that day actually came from God. Then he would replace the veil until the next time.

“If you will, you can become all flame.”

One day, Jesus revealed to the disciples that when he next went to Jerusalem, he would die there. Then he went up onto Mount Tabor to pray.

But, unlike Moses, he didn’t go alone. He took three ordinary people with him, the disciples Peter, James and John. There was no fence around the mountain to protect the unsuspecting wanderer. There was no protection against the glory of

God, the presence of God. The four went up together and, as Jesus was praying, he became all flame.

Icons of the Transfiguration show Peter, James and John's reaction to this light. They look like bowling pins scattered over the landscape. Peter holds up his hand in defense, John holds his hand over his face, James is sliding down the mountain on his back head first. At the same time, they want to capture the experience, hold onto Moses and Elijah who have appeared with Our Lord. They want to build booths to make all this last as long as possible.

This whole story is so different from the story in Exodus. In Exodus, only Moses gets to hear God directly. And while Moses is allowed to see the back of God's Glory as it passes by, he is not allowed to gaze directly upon the face of God. And, when he comes away from this, and each subsequent direct experience of God, he has to wear a veil over his face because people can't bear to look on him.

However, in the Transfiguration of our Lord, the disciples see the glory of God face to face, and in the cloud, they hear God's voice for themselves.

And then it was all gone. And, when the four of them return to earth, no one's face is shining, not even Jesus's. There is no sign upon any of them, not even on Jesus, of the experience on the mountain. And the disciples kept silent and told no one what they had seen.

The light and the cloud and the voice were gone. Moses and Elijah were gone. Only Jesus remains.

In the book of Exodus, God is invisible, hidden in light inaccessible. On Mount Tabor, the mount of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, God comes out of hiding. Rowan Williams writes that in the Transfiguration we see that "Jesus' human life is shot through with God's." In him is "all the fullness of the creator". Elijah and Moses appear in glory, but it's a glory that's reflected onto them from Jesus. Jesus is transfigured, but Jesus also transfigures everything. If we don't want to be changed, if we don't want to reflect his glory, it is best not to look too long at Jesus or to spend too much time with him.

As Jesus is transfigured, shown to be shot through with the life of God, we find that "God's life is *compatible* with every bit of human life, including the inner terrors of Gethsemane (fear and doubt) and the outer terrors of Calvary (torment and death)." As Jesus embraces fear, doubt, torment and death, so does God. In the Transfiguration, we see God journeying "towards us out of [God's] depths."

And "everything in our experience is open to God..." Which means that even if we fear or doubt, God will not disappear on us. We need never fear that it is impossible for us to stay standing before God in times of failure. Look at the disciples! Even here at the Transfiguration of their Lord, they fail to understand

what they are seeing and experiencing. What they don't know at that moment, is that at Gethsemane they will understand a little bit, and after the resurrection they will understand a little more, and centuries later, we will understand yet a little more.

God cannot be exiled to Mount Sinai, fenced off from all but the chosen few. God cannot be exiled from any human story. God in Christ dwells in light; God in Christ is also in the heart of our deepest darkness. The final shape of the story of our lives is in God's hands, and God is the best judge of "what really matters to God, what shows God to the world." This is the message of the Transfiguration.

Our lives are held in God, and God knows how best to use even our failures. The challenge of the Transfiguration, then, is in knowing that we are invited to go wherever Jesus goes, even into the heart of darkness. The message of the Transfiguration is not one of easy consolation. Rather, as we go through our daily lives, reflecting on our failures and successes, our sufferings and our hope, we do so with the knowledge "that there is a depth to the world's reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human [lives.]"

(Quotations from: *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*. Rowan Williams, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2004.)