

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 6, 2023 – The Feast of the Transfiguration
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36
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If you are a regular churchgoer, this morning's lessons from Exodus and Luke will sound familiar. That is because they are lessons appointed for Sundays when we remember the Transfiguration of our Lord. Every year, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, that is what we do. Before we enter the season of Lent, the church remembers the vision of Christ's glory given to his disciples at the Transfiguration. In the church calendar, August 6th is the specific date set aside to remember the Transfiguration. When it falls on a Sunday, as it does this year, we hear again the lessons we heard today, and today's Collect as well as the hymn we just sang (O wondrous type!) honor this important event in the life of Christ and his followers.

This morning's lesson from the Old Testament book of Exodus is a portion of many chapters describing the law given by God to Moses for the guidance of God's people. God summons Moses to climb Mount Sinai alone and wait for God to give him the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. Once Moses was on the mountain, we read that "the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day [God] called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain."

In the Hebrew Bible the visual form in which God appears to human beings is usually described as fiery or as enveloped in cloud or fire. You will remember that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. And during the exodus from Egypt, God led the people through the wilderness by going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Scripture records that "Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights." Moses entered the presence of God and remained in God's presence for a long time. Further on in Exodus we have this morning's passage: "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." Moses' face shone with the reflected glory of God.

Now let's move forward in time approximately 1,300 years to the event recorded in Luke's Gospel. The Transfiguration of Christ occurred shortly after Jesus had first told his disciples about the suffering and death he was facing and about his resurrection: "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" (Luke 9:22). On the mountain Jesus is revealed, the dazzling light of his glory forever tied to his journey to Jerusalem, to his death, and to his resurrection.

On the mountain Jesus receives God's confirmation: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Luke recorded that when Jesus was baptized, at the beginning of his ministry, God spoke very similar words: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). We are meant to understand that from the beginning to the end, through every event in the life and ministry of Jesus, this is who Jesus is – God's Son, Chosen and Beloved.

When Jesus was on the mountain, transfigured in the presence of his disciples, he talked with Moses and Elijah. Moses, the man through whom God gave the law to God's people, and Elijah, a great prophet, healer, and miracle worker. In one sense, at the Transfiguration Jesus was having a conversation with his peers, for he was also appointed by God to teach God's ways, to fulfill the law and the prophets, and to demonstrate the power of God through miracles and healing.

But Jesus was essentially different from Moses and Elijah. The radiance the disciples saw in Jesus' face was not the reflected glory of God, as it had been for Moses. The radiance was within Jesus. The divine was within him and shining through him. What happened at the Transfiguration was that for a brief time the veil was drawn aside, and Jesus' divine nature was visible to his disciples. He was not changed or transformed. He was revealed: the beloved Son of God, different from all others, both human and divine. Christ's glory revealed in dazzling light – white light, the color of purity, of light without darkness.

Unlike Christ, we are fully human. I wonder what we might learn from the experience of Moses, who was also fully human. Called by God to go to the mountain, Moses obeyed God's summons. He remained on the mountain with the Lord for a long time. Scripture tells us that during that long time Moses "neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Exodus 34:28). In other words, Moses obeyed God's call to go and listen to God, and he then spent a long time listening to God's instructions about how to live. His fasting tells us that during this time Moses' stance before God was humble, prepared, and receptive.

How do we hear God's call to leave the trials and troubles of our lives, our busy-ness and activity, and spend time listening to God? Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston puts it well: "Be alert to the invitation. I believe the Spirit offers us invitations, often quite unexpected. We are placed in moments of life where we have a choice to make. We are invited to respond – to act, to think, to feel, to choose. This is not a test. It is an opportunity – to participate, to change, to discover, to bless. It all begins by being alert to the invitation."

Once we hear the invitation of God, how do we respond? Our attitude toward God is important. Moses gives us the example of being humble, prepared, and receptive when he was with God. Certainly, we are meant to speak to God and not only listen to God. But not as equals, as "pals." It is not for us to tell God what to do, but for us to listen for what God wants us to do. Our prayer can sometimes sound like a "to do list" for God! That's the wrong way round. We are to be changed and guided. If we are not receptive to God's guidance, our time of prayer will be barren.

One particular sentence of this morning's lesson stood out for me: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." There is spiritual wisdom in these few words. For there is "something" about some people who spend time with God that can be seen or felt, a grace, a light, some quality that is difficult to describe. We find our souls attracted to God's reflection in a person of deep prayer. And often the person who is reflecting God's love and goodness has no knowledge of that. Because the person's focus is on God, not on the self. We see this lesson over and over again in scripture. Think of the great prophet, John the Baptist, always pointing to Christ, minimizing his own ministry and popularity, holding himself in right relation to the one greater than he.

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). May we seek to know God better and to live more according to God's ways, day by day. May we live so that others think well of God, so that others are drawn to God and give glory to God. May we, in some small way, reflect God's goodness and love, for the sake of God's world and God's people. In Jesus' name. Amen.