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**Transfiguration, Year A, Luke 9:28-36**  
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**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

## **Introduction**

- I told you some weeks ago that that there were no *major* feast days in the “ordinary time” between Pentecost and Advent (technically, every Sunday is a feast day). Well, I was wrong. I think this is only the second time...
  - I forgot that some feasts that fall on fixed days—the Holy Name, the Presentation, and the Transfiguration—take precedence when they fall on a Sunday
  - So today, we’ll take a breather from Paul and look at the mysterious and enigmatic story of Jesus’ transfiguration
- I would guess that many of us are not sure what to make of the transfiguration—at least, it leaves me confused
  - When I was in seminary, many NT scholars then believed the Transfiguration was post-Easter story that had been read back into the life of Jesus
  - Contemporary scholars admit that, whenever the story originated, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to use it *historically* to reconstruct what happened to Jesus or what he actually said and did
  - But let’s look at it again in its narrative context, both in the larger context and in the more immediate context, to see if we can’t get some idea about what it might mean—for Jesus and for us

## **Context**

- The larger context is found in the story of Moses that we read in our first lesson from Exodus
  - Moses had just received the Ten Commandments—you may recall the story...
    - This was actually the *second* time he received the commandments—after he returned the first time he found the people of Israel worshipping a golden calf, and threw the stone tablets to the ground, breaking them in his anger

- Later, he returned to Sinai for forty days and nights to intercede for his people, and there he received a second tablet, and this is where we pick up the story
  - On his return from being in the presence of God, his face was shining so brightly that he needed to wear a veil to protect others from the brightness (one Jewish commentator claims that “beams” of light were emanating from his face [[www.mesora.org/torahswriting.html](http://www.mesora.org/torahswriting.html)])
  - Many Jews believe that the light of Moses’ face reflected what is called the “shekinah” or glory of the Lord’s presence
- Now, let’s jump ahead now to Jesus’ transfiguration and look at it in the immediate context of Gospel narratives...
  - The transfiguration occurs after Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah, though perhaps we shouldn’t make too much of this
    - It is clear that Peter doesn’t understand the significance of his confession, at least from Jesus’ point of view, since he is rebuked after Jesus tells his disciples about his coming arrest and death
    - But Peter just can’t accept it
  - So, instead, Jesus then gives them a sense of what it means that he is a Messiah who is heading toward crucifixion and, perhaps more importantly, what it will mean to them if they want to be his followers—he gives them
    - 1) a summons: if you want to be my followers, you must deny yourselves and take up my cross,
    - 2) a warning: if you try to save you lives, you will lose them in any case, and
    - 3) a promise: some will not taste death until they see the coming of the kingdom of God in power (Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 650-651)
  - Eight days later (strangely, six days in Mark and Matthew) Luke tell us, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain to pray and there he is “transfigured” before their eyes

## **The Transfiguration**

- So, both stories, the story of Moses coming back down from Sinai and Jesus on the mountain, both stories...

- Occur after a failure of the people around them
- Both leaders feel the need to rebuke that failure and then return to prayer in God's presence on a mountain
- In both cases, the shining light (of Moses' face and of Jesus' garments) are a sign that the two
  - 1) have been in the presence of God, and
  - 2) that God approves of their work—for Moses, the giving of the Torah and, for Jesus, the facing of the cross (his "departure") as the Messiah, with all the ambiguity that we've come to understand about it...
- So, what's going on here? Some key things to note:
  - The transfiguration takes place on a mountain, with clouds that both hide and reveal God's presence, and this is always a signal in the Bible that something important is happening
  - Moses and Elijah are present—I haven't mentioned Elijah yet, but symbolically their presence could suggest that, in Jesus the Messiah, both the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled
  - The message from God ("this is my Son...") is not so much about Jesus' divinity but is more about his royal status as Messiah and David's heir (though later it was certainly read as a statement about Jesus' divinity)
  - Finally, I want to come back to this notion of God's *glory*...do we have any sense of what this might mean?
- Moses doesn't see God directly—he can't, if we want to survive—but instead he sees and then shares God's glory, as evidenced by his shining face; Also, while he was praying, Jesus' face changed, his clothes became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah appeared with him—again, we are told, in glory; finally, the reading from II Peter tells us that Jesus "received honor and glory" from God and the voice was conveyed to them by Majestic Glory...
  - This is all very mysterious to me, but this glory is both an effect of being in the presence of God and an indirect way of talking about God's presence
  - The glory of God comes with wonder, awe, and a genuine fear—fear that this presence is too much for us and, often, we are afraid because we fear (rightly) that we are not worthy of it

- But this story and the glory it reveals may not be just about Jesus—it may also signal to us about what our lives will be like when God’s kingdom fully arrives on the new earth, in the new creation—earth will be then “as it is in heaven” and this may be a glimpse of the transfigured life that is being held out for all of us who are part of Jesus’ world-wide family

## Conclusion

- I want to end by directing us to one other verse: “...since they stayed awake, they saw his glory...”
  - Being “awake” is code-language for spiritual awareness or sensitivity; being “asleep” is the opposite (contrast this experience with the times the disciples fell asleep when Jesus needed them most)
    - The spiritual teachers of perhaps all the major religions of the world believe that most of us live our lives asleep
    - Think about what this could mean for us—being awake is what we are asked to do in our own faith—to wake up, to open our eyes, to see the glory of God in and around us—not in the new creation that is coming in the future, but now, in the kingdom of God that is already present
    - Think of what that could mean? To live our life awake to God’s presence and glory—in us and all about us...What might that mean? Amen.