

Transfiguration C 2019, March 3, 2019, Luke 9:28-44, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Of all the stories in the New Testament about Jesus I find the one we just heard, called the Transfiguration of Jesus, the most intriguing and, to be frank, the most odd. The sudden change in his appearance, the sudden appearance of two long dead Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, seem somehow out of place. Up to this point Jesus has been engaged in a truly earthly ministry of teaching, healing, proclaiming the coming reign of God. The Transfiguration seems so other worldly. More in keeping with something that might have happened after the resurrection and not before.

But here it is. This story of Jesus' sudden transfiguration into the glory he has and is. The gospel writers see the Transfiguration as the completion of a pair of bookends. The other bookend came at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was baptized in the Jordan river by John. There too the voice of Jesus' heavenly Father is heard, "this is my beloved Son." During this season of Epiphany we have been hearing how Jesus is revealed as the Son of God; first by the visitation of the Wise Men, then his baptism, his healings and teachings and now the Transfiguration. It's fitting that this Epiphany season concludes with the Transfiguration. The biblical writers place this story at a critical turning point in Jesus' life. After this event Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem. He will go there to confront the powers, to suffer death on a cross and be raised from the dead. So too in our liturgical journey which mirrors the life of our Lord. This week we begin our journey with Jesus during the season of Lent, towards Jerusalem, towards the cross and new life.

All of the gospel writers also follow the story of the Transfiguration with the story of a boy who is desperately ill, so sick that the disciples hadn't been able to cure him. Remember what I've told you about stories in the Bible. When all the gospel writers tell us the same thing about Jesus it's because it's important. All of them see these two events as going together. Jesus' transfigured with the light of divine glory quickly gives way to healing a demon-possessed boy. The experience of God's glory, of seeing God on the mountain top and experiencing deep communion with God is balanced by moving deeper into the pain and suffering of the world. We want to linger on the top of the mountain, basking in the glory of God, but Jesus moves us down off the mountain, into the valleys where real life occurs daily.

By casting these two episodes together we see the reality of God's work in the world and in our lives. For we all glimpse moments of God's glory; the beautiful transfiguring light of joy when the love of Jesus shines in our lives. But they are often momentary, transitory moments that cannot last but a short time.

And we also experience the brokenness of the world in which the demons of disease or broken relationships or any of the various ways suffering seems to negate the glory of God. These two poles of our Christian experience belong together, and we can't separate them. God's beauty and transfiguring glory, seen in Jesus shining on the mountain belongs with the suffering and anguish that is so much a part of this broken world in which we live.

If this is true for us as individuals it's also true for us as a community of faith. For on any given Sunday one of us may be sitting here basking in the glory of God, having glimpsed a shining moment of brightness and love; and someone else is weighed down with burdens that may feel crushing and oppressive. You may be sitting close to someone right now who is experiencing something completely different than you are. Maybe glory, maybe suffering. But just as our gospel writers tell us that these two stories belong together, so do those who experience God differently belong together.

I very much appreciate what the writer Debie Thomas says about this Transfiguration story in the Bible. She writes, "I tend to interpret the Bible as if its stories apply only to me — *me*, an individual. *My* mountaintop experience. *My* valley. *My* relationship with God. But this is so misguided. So dangerous. The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit — while one pew over I cry my eyes out because the ache of His absence feels unbearable." And then, thinking about this side-by-side, yet often silent and unexpressed, experiences she goes on to say, "here's the great challenge to the Christian life — the great challenge to the Church, Christ's body: can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other — denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love for each other, so that no one among us — not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one — is ever truly alone?"

Ms. Thomas is right. The great tragedy of modern life is our tendency to go in alone. A triumph, a moment of glory, is mine and mine alone. My suffering is mine and mine alone. Our attempts at forging a truly authentic Christian community in which no one is every truly alone are often thwarted by this deep-seeded desire to see ourselves as completely independent and autonomous.

This itself is part of the brokenness in the world that Jesus came to heal. While Jesus came to forgive us of our sin, that's not all that salvation accomplishes. For as important as forgiveness might be, the restoration of a truly authentic community life is just as important. "It is not good that the man be alone," are among the first words God spoke about the first human being. We are

created for one another. We are meant to live with and for each other, so that no one is ever truly alone.

Our experiences of God and of the brokenness of life will be different. And this is true as individual persons; one year, one moment we are with Jesus on the mountain in glory and the next moment we struggle against the demons of this world seeking to cloud God's glory in our lives. But it's also true in our common life together; one may experience glory while another suffers. We see how God is in the midst of both sets of experiences and in the midst of a community where both exist side by side. Jesus's transfiguring glory and light just as quickly comes down off the mountain to reach the one who suffers. Both belong to God. Both belong to the one who shines in glory and suffers for our sake on the cross. And we, together, as the community of God's people, belong to him. Amen.