

Holy, Holy, Holy

Transfiguration Sunday

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Mary Elizabeth Hanchey

“And he was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, or an observance of the Feast of the Transfiguration.

It is possible that you are searching your mental files for remembrances of what this is all about. In this Protestant, free-church space, the Transfiguration may not feel as familiar as Christmas, or Easter, or Epiphany. But I assure you that the Feast of the Transfiguration is no new-fangled thing: it was celebrated in Jerusalem as early as the 5th Century, and throughout the Byzantine Empire by the 7th Century. The Transfiguration is found in three of the four gospels - in the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's not found in John, even though John is reported to be present.

Transfiguration. Think transpose. Or transform. The transformation into something more spiritual and mystical. But THE Transfiguration is a becoming that is more about revelation than change. This is a story about the revelation of Jesus' full divinity and not about something substantive changing about Jesus.

Peter, James, and John, accompany Jesus up a high mountain (generally understood to be Mt. Tabor) and encounter the ghostly figures of Elijah and Moses, as well as a cloud of presence of the Divine. Jesus' clothing and face glow - a shimmering sign of holiness.

The presence of Moses and Elijah place Jesus in conversation with well established religious authority: Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. They validate Jesus' authority. And then the voice of God says “This is my Son, the Beloved with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

The disciples really aren't sure what to do. In the midst of these mystical elements, the disciples struggle, for good reason, to make sense of what they are experiencing.

Peter's first impulse is to pitch tents so that they might stay there, in the midst of this holy mountain-top experience. “This is awesome,” he seems to suggest. “Let's just stay here.”

But after the voice of God speaks from the cloud of presence, the disciples are afraid, according to this telling in Matthew. (Neither Mark nor Luke describe them as being afraid). They are, at the least, in a posture of reverence. Jesus calls them out of their fear and off of the ground, and together they descend the mountain.

We engage with this story as a revelation of Jesus' divinity, as an important demonstration that Jesus is something more than human.

As we wonder what to do with this story - I think it is significant to understand where this story falls in the story arc of the gospels, and of the church year.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of the Transfiguration directly follows Jesus foretelling his own death. "I am going to go to Jerusalem and be killed," Jesus has said. But then we are shown a shimmering Jesus, fully validated by the law and the prophets and the voice of the One God. "Pay attention," the writers seem to be saying. "Listen to him," says the voice of the Divine in all three gospels. Up here in the mystical presence of the whole story of the law and the prophets, of all that has formed the religious tradition from which these disciples come, the One God says simply - listen to him. Listen to the one who says that he is going to Jerusalem to die. Listen to Jesus.

And then, somewhat anti-climatically, Jesus and the disciples leave this mountaintop experience behind and return to Jesus' work in the world. There are many chapters of teaching and miracles before Judas agrees to betray Jesus to the authorities. And in none of the gospels do the disciples tell what they have seen. In none of the gospels do stories about Jesus' divinity - or his glowing - begin to filter into Jesus' teaching or teaching about Jesus. It's a part of the weirdness of this story with which theologians wrestle. Are we supposed to think that Jesus did not want anyone to know? Or is this more of an explanation for why people didn't really seem to know?

I'm struck by the possibility that right belief about the essence of Jesus' humanity and divinity takes a backseat to all of the work of being in the world by Jesus and the disciples. Right here, at the very beginning, orthodoxy seems to lose ground. "This is not what we are going to spend our energy on," Jesus seems to insist. Jesus' death is coming, and there is work to be done.

And so, within the structure of the gospels, the story of the Transfiguration is anchored to Jesus' foretelling of his death.

Within the church year, there are several places that observation of the Transfiguration might come. Catholic and Orthodox traditions place this Feast on August 6 - a date declared by a Pope in the 1400's as a thank offering for a military win. Some traditions place it on the second Sunday of Lent, a part of the slog towards the crucifixion.

I appreciate its placement here at the turn from Epiphany to Lent, placement that is relatively common in the Western Protestant tradition. Epiphany, then, begins and ends with Light. You may remember that on Epiphany in this sanctuary we claimed the imperative: Get Up. Be Light. And today, as we turn toward the wilderness of Lent, as we head back down the mountain into the world, we might accept the imperative given to the disciples: Listen to him. Listen to the light.

But there is something else that I don't want to miss: the idea of holiness is woven through all of our texts and much of our music today.

"God, your way is in holiness" we proclaimed in our call to worship.

“Holy, holy holy” we sang together as we turned our hearts and minds to the worship of the living God.

This shimmering Jesus - shining in the presence of Moses and Elijah, blessed by the Cloud of presence - this is about holiness.

But what do you mean when you say “Holy?” What do we mean?

“Holiness” is sometimes, in the scripture, about following purity laws. The rules about holiness found in law are sometimes understood to be overridden by Jesus. Sometimes Jesus has to say - look, you have heard this, but I say this instead.

But the law, the rules set out such as the ones we have from Leviticus today, can also demonstrate that being holy has something to do with living justly - with just interactions, just treatment, a just economy.”

“You shall not render justice unjust.” says Leviticus.

This portion of Leviticus connects holiness with talking about unfair wages and wrongly celebrating poverty. This portion of Leviticus connects holiness with prohibitions on slander and hate and vengeance. This portion of Leviticus says - “You shall not stand by the blood of your neighbor, for I am the Most High God.”

We know that these instructions about holiness are echoed in the gospel. That this is what Jesus teaches; that Jesus, who both embodies and challenges the law and the prophets points those who will listen toward justice that is manifest in the economy, and our provision for the physical health and well-being of our neighbors. We know that this way of living is hard that it requires choosing holiness that is active and engaged.

“Listen to what he says.”

Family of God when we observe the Transfiguration, we remember that mystery is a part of our faith. We remember that there is something mystical about the way that our tradition and scripture and redemption are bound up in each other. We remember that there is space in our faith for a shimmering Jesus, and thin places where God appears, and the overwhelm of mountaintop experiences. And we remember that we are called, again and again into the world, into the story of Jesus’ ministry among us.

Family of God - Listen to what he says, for in it you might just find yourself doing holy work in the presence of the holy one.