

Transfiguration of Our Lord, Year C

February 14, 2010

Exodus 34: 29-35, Psalm 99, 2 Corinthians 3: 12-4: 2, Luke 9: 28-43a

Exodus 34:29-35

{29} 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. *{30}* When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. *{31}* But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. *{32}* Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. *{33}* When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; *{34}* but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, *{35}* the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Psalm 99

{1} The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! *{2}* The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. *{3}* Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! *{4}* Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. *{5}* Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he! *{6}* Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them. *{7}* He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them. *{8}* O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. *{9}* Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

{12} Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, *{13}* not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. *{14}* But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. *{15}* Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; *{16}* but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. *{17}* Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. *{18}* And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. *{4:1}* Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. *{2}* We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Luke 9:28-36 [37-43]

{28} Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. *{29}* And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. *{30}* Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. *{31}* They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. *{32}* Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. *{33}* Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. *{34}* While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. *{35}* Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" *{36}* When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. *{37}* On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. *{38}* Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. *{39}* Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. *{40}* I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." *{41}* Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." *{42}* While he was coming, the demon dashed

him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. {43} And all were astounded at the greatness of God.]

A disclaimer. Between my sometimes poor memory and even poorer sense of direction, I can't guarantee that all of the details I'm about to relate are one hundred percent accurate, but, as they sometimes say on TV, they are definitely "based upon actual occurrences".

This is, even by the standards of the Bible, a strange festival that we celebrate today and the readings don't help much either. It all seems so "other worldly" and "close encounters of the third kindish". What could this possibly say to twenty first century Christians who live in a very "post modern" world?

In my sermon preparations I'm never actually quite sure where I'll wind up. Well, it turns out I discovered an unexpected and "practical" message that I would consider a legitimate extension from the Gospel reading. So, here goes.

I 270 is a road that connects Washington, DC with parts of Maryland and then into Pennsylvania as well. When I lived in Gettysburg, PA and eventually had a more reliable car that I could trust to drive more than 20 miles from my home, I made the 70 mile trip into DC once a month or so in order to get my "city fix". Part of the I 270 stretch, to my eyes at least, is a very beautiful part of the country with many hills and mountains, particularly beautiful during the spring, summer and fall seasons. A few miles before Frederick, MD, while traveling north, there is a point when you reach the top of a mountain and an absolutely breathtaking vista opens up before you as you begin the descent. It was all I could do, sometimes, to pay attention to the driving.

Anyway, at that point there is also a sign on the right side of the road that reads "Scenic Overlook", with a place to pull off and enjoy the view. But, there is something else written on that sign, something a little strange: "Scenic Overlook. *No Bathrooms*". In all honesty, my guess is that this is a well-intentioned attempt by the highway authorities to help avoid confusing drivers or raising expectations in case one is in desperate need of such facilities. However, that sign also communicates another, even if unintended, message to me: "Enjoy the view, but don't linger too long."

As it turns out, that is one of the many messages that can be taken from the Gospel reading for today on this Transfiguration Sunday.

Listen again to Peter's initial response to the strange and wondrous event unfolding before his eyes: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah..." (Luke 9:33)

In all of the Gospels, if something stupid, impulsive, or insensitive is said, it is a relatively good bet that at least seven out of ten times it would be Peter saying it. Traditionally, Peter's first response to the Transfiguration event has not been looked upon very kindly. Even the author of St. Luke's Gospel feels the need to "cover" or explain for Peter: "...no knowing what he said." (Lk. 9:33. Another way of understanding that line is, "Well, you know, that's just Peter being Peter.")

Interestingly, neither Jesus, Elijah, Moses, the other two disciples present, nor even "the voice from the cloud" (that would be God) take Peter to task for this remark. It is simply passed over without comment by any of them. I'm glad. Dear Peter. So human. So much like us. "Wow! This is great! Let's make sure we never forget! Let's make this a "Kodak moment". Maybe we can even sell tickets some day. In fact, why don't we just stay here forever?"

Can you really blame the guy?

When it comes to unimaginable or life altering events, it is only human to want and need to stop and linger for a while- maybe even to settle in "for the duration". Life moves too fast. Things can get overwhelming. There are places or times along our life journeys that just beckon us to pull off the road for a while.

But, it is also all too human to want to overstay our welcome in what I call the lands of sorrow, anger, grief, bitterness, regret, shame, disappointment, and yes, even the "aha" moments or the times of "over the top" happiness.

It's easy to see why we need to move past the "bad" stuff, but why can't we hold on to the others? I don't really know. What I do know is that for some reason, the harder and tighter we try to hold on to even the "mountain top" experiences of our lives, the more we are in danger of destroying them.

Take in the view. Don't linger too long.

Today's Gospel story has also traditionally been taken to apply to things like prayer and worship (after all, in St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus was at prayer when this occurred). If we're honest, most of us do, in fact, desire some "aha" moments or some tangible experiences of God's presence when we pray and worship, at least some times. Some traditions within Christianity practically "guarantee" it (or even require it) much, if not all of the time. Lutheranism,

in case you wondered, isn't one of those traditions. Wanting these is not necessarily bad, in fact, it's very human and not something God would look down upon or condemn us for. When folks come to talk with me, the only answer I can provide, which feels somewhat inadequate, is: "It's okay to want that. Ask God for it. See what happens."

Notice, however, that the final instructions from the "voice from the cloud" (that would be God) are to "*listen*", not to "look", or to "wonder", or to "speculate". In the final analysis, Christianity is not about experiences, wonderful though they might be, but about listening for the voice of Jesus, no matter where we happen to be, whether on the mountain or in the valley. It's about obedience and trust.

I can't help but notice how much of what happens in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, is "painfully ordinary". The real challenge for today is not in finding God in "mountain top" experiences, but in seeing God as fully present and active in the very ordinary and mundane parts of life. The commentaries I consulted were equally divided over whether or not it was a good idea to include the optional section about the exorcism of the boy to today's Gospel reading (Luke 33: 37-43a). I think it's a good idea and also that it's not coincidental that this same story follows the account of the Transfiguration in the other two Gospels as well. Not exactly how I would have followed up on the Transfiguration story with all of its "lights, cameras, and action" (I would have been closer to St. Peter on that one), but perhaps *that's* exactly the point.

As the sign on highway I 270 reminds us, "Enjoy the fabulous and scenic view, but remember there's no bathroom around, so don't plan on staying for very long."

Let us pray. How good, Lord, to be here! Yet we may not remain; but since you bid us leave the mount, come with us to the plain. (ELW 315, v. 4)

AMEN.