



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Transfiguration (C)

#### Listen to Him!

[RCL] Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99 or 99:5-9; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

[God] spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud; they kept his testimonies and the decree that he gave them. O LORD our God, you answered them indeed (Psalm 99). Amen.

The setting of today's reading from Luke, the Transfiguration, is visually balanced, the elements creating the harmony of an icon. On a mountain, Jesus prays with Peter, James, and John, three of his closest disciples. Suddenly his face and clothing become dazzling white, and the great prophets Elijah and Moses appear beside him. The light, "as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29), echoes the light shining from Moses in Exodus, whose "face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exodus 34:29). With this shining light, each has been transfigured, a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.

Let us paint this image, or write this icon, in our mind's eye. At the peak of a triangular mountain, Jesus dominates the scene, glowing in dazzling white robes. He is flanked by the great prophets, Moses and Elijah. At their feet, on the side of the mountain, the three disciples have fallen to the ground, dazed and awestruck. Jesus stands at the center of a cloud, which surrounds him and the prophets, and emanates downward to enter the hearts of Jesus' companions. The entire tableau is surrounded by golden light.

Aaron, the Israelites, Peter, James, and John all know that this dazzling light is something extraordinary, something from God. According to Eastern Orthodox doctrine, the light which shone from Christ on Mount Tabor is uncreated, having its source in God's own being, mystical, eternal, without beginning or end. Western spirituality more typically sees the light of the transfiguration as symbolic of the glory of heaven, an occasion of divine revelation. While Moses experiences the light when he talks with God, and Elijah experienced the light in the chariot of fire when he was lifted up to heaven, because of his divine identity, Jesus is, in fact, himself the light.

So for the disciples, witnessing the light of God's glory in Jesus' meeting with the great Hebrew prophets is a dramatic experience of God and a clear revelation of Jesus' identity. Weighed down by sleep, confused, they hear the voice of God emerging from the cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

In scripture, the light, the revelation of God's presence, often seems to emerge from a cloud, the essence of God's spirit. The Holy Spirit. The event of the transfiguration is also a dramatic manifestation of the Trinity: on Mount Tabor, Peter, James, and John heard the Father, saw the Son, and were enveloped by the Holy Spirit.

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Further, the moment is a confirmation that Jesus' ministry is a continuation of the Hebrew tradition of the law in Moses, and the prophets in Elijah.

In his second letter, Peter speaks of becoming participants in the divine nature. The experience on Mount Tabor is transforming. As eyewitnesses, for Peter and the others, there is no room for doubt. Peter writes, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." The message is clear: Jesus is fully God, and the prophets and eyewitnesses have heard God's voice, spoken through the Holy Spirit.

"This is my son; listen to him!" The transfiguration story has much to tell us about prayer, spiritual retreat, and refreshment. Both the reading from Exodus and the reading from Luke occur in the context of prayer. Moses and Jesus have been hard at work, leading and teaching their people. Tired, they leave their work behind and go up to a high mountain to be alone with God. They separate themselves from their people and go on spiritual retreat.

Moses goes alone up to Mount Sinai, where God comes to him in a cloud. Moses worships, raising his voice in prayer. Moses listens. God gives him the words of the covenant, and Moses descends, his face shining. For Jesus, like Moses, prayer involves a dramatic encounter with God's presence. For Jesus, like Moses, prayer is a true spiritual experience of God.

How can we pray? May our prayer be a time of rest and retreat, seeking the powerful presence of God. Perhaps we will not see a glorious light, nor emerge with our faces shining because we have seen God. We may speak words in hopes that God will listen to us. In fact, our task is to listen to God. We may be confused at what we see and hear, as the disciples were on Mount Tabor. We may seek to act out of our confusion, like Peter when he proposed to build three dwellings and stay in the good place he has found. Let us imagine Peter writing his letter to the faithful, years after his powerful eyewitness experience on Mount Tabor. What does he remember, what does he want to imprint in the memory of his readers? Peter recalls that he heard God's voice. What is his advice to his community as he prepares to leave them? "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place." Listen. Attend. This is my son; listen to him!

Let us pray. Come Holy Spirit, let us go up to the mountain. Let our hearts become quite calm so that God's spirit may fill us. Give us such fineness of hearing that our hearts may listen. Grant us patience, inspiration, a glimpse of God's glory. May we be moved by the Holy Spirit to speak, and act, from the voice of God. May the light of Christ be with us always. Amen.

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