

Sunday, February 27, 2022 – “Listening and Looking for God”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 9:28-36

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 9:28-36 (*Common English Bible*).

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. ³¹ They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus’ departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem. ³² Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep, but they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him.

³³ As the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it’s good that we’re here. We should construct three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—but he didn’t know what he was saying. ³⁴ Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them. As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe.

³⁵ Then a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!” ³⁶ Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone. They were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen.

This Sunday, on the threshold of Lent, that forty-day walk toward the cross of Christ, we find ourselves standing with Jesus and three of his closest disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. Although the wonder of the Transfiguration is a challenge for most postmodern people, it’s an important story. All of the Synoptic Gospels narrate the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-26). Even 2 Peter 1:18 mentions it. It’s apparent that Matthew and Luke take their renditions of the Transfiguration from Mark’s Gospel, though there are differences.

Comparing Luke’s account with Mark’s, Luke says the Transfiguration occurs “about eight days” after (Luke 9:28) Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter declared, “The Messiah of God” (Luke 9:20, *NRSV*) and Jesus had made his prediction about his suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection (read Luke 9:21-22). Jesus’ death prediction is followed by his call to discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23, *NRSV*). So about eight days after Jesus has said all of these things, the Transfiguration takes place, according to Luke’s Gospel. Mark and Matthew (Mark 9:2; Matthew 17:1) say it happens six days after Peter’s confession and Jesus’ prediction and call to discipleship. Luke says that Jesus went up the mountain to pray (Luke 9:29). Is Jesus struggling with his mission as the cross looms before him? In fact, Luke doesn’t say that Jesus was actually “transfigured” (Greek, *metamorphothe*), the word that is used in Mark and Matthew. We may wonder why. Luke says only that Jesus’ “face was changed” along with the other two historical figures who are “clothed with heavenly splendor” and join him on the mountain. Jesus’ clothing becomes dazzling white. Like the disciples so long ago, we struggle with Jesus’ true identity, wondering if he is the Messiah and, if he is, what sort of Messiah he will be.

Luke 9:31-33 displays material that is found solely in Luke, such as Luke’s account of the nature of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Luke also says that the disciples fell asleep during the conversation, though somehow still managed to see the transfiguration of Jesus and the two men with him (Mark 9:32). Curiously, this verse can be translated as the disciples “were weighed down with sleep, but when they were fully awake, they saw his glory.” Are the disciples “fully awake” whenever they are able to see Jesus in his transfigured glory as the dazzling divine Son, who is more than their rabbi? Perhaps we are more “fully awake”

when we see Jesus not just as a moral teacher but as our Messiah who transforms our lives so that we can experience the reign of God in our daily actions. It gives new meaning to the word “woke”, doesn’t it?

Luke’s story of the Transfiguration in conversion with our First Scripture Reading from Exodus 34:29-35 is worth noting. Moses, fresh from being in the awesome presence of God where he has received the Ten Commandments, comes down from Mount Sinai. “The skin of Moses’ face shone brightly because he had been talking with God” (Exodus 34:29). Jesus, conversing with the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, is hereby connected with the great teacher and prophet Moses who represents the Law of God as well as Elijah who represents the Prophets. Remember that Jesus said that he came not to destroy the Law and the Prophets but in fulfillment of them (read Matthew 5:17-18).

Both Moses and Elijah had received revelation on mountains. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17), and Elijah received the revelation of “the still small voice” on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:12, *NRSV*). Now we too are about to witness revelation on a mountain through this Transfiguration story.

Deuteronomy 18:15 says that Moses will reappear in the promised messianic age, and Malachi 4:5 speaks of the return of Elijah. Also, we may remember from our Sunday School lessons the story of Elijah being carried off into heaven while riding a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11-12).

Luke is the only Gospel attempting to tell us the substance of the Transfiguration conversation, saying that Moses and Elijah “were speaking of Jesus’ departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). The Greek word translated as “departure” is “*exodus*.” The conversation is about departure, exodus through the looming suffering, death, and resurrection. As I mentioned earlier, just before he goes up on this mountain, Jesus has predicted his coming passion (Luke 9:22). The three “shrines” (*Common English Bible*) translated “dwellings” (*NRSV*) recall the dwellings used at the Festival of Booths, an annual harvest festival that celebrates the Exodus (read Leviticus 23:39-43).

Moses and Elijah, these great figures of the faith of Israel, speak of Jesus’ forthcoming “exodus” out of life (death) and out of the tomb (resurrection). The presence of Moses and Elijah confirm that Jesus’ journey, his cruciform destination, is the will of God.

In the midst of it all, we hear a voice from on high announcing Jesus’ identity as God’s Son, God’s chosen one. Of course, the voice reminds us of the voice that was heard when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan (Luke 3:22). Now the voice tells the disciples to listen to Jesus (Luke 3:35).

That’s what disciples are supposed to do throughout Luke’s Gospel – listen to Jesus. They have found that the task of listening to Jesus is very challenging. The conversation and heavenly voice on the mountaintop ends with silence (Luke 9:36). In the other Gospel parallels, Jesus commands the three disciples to be silent (Mark 9:9; Matthew 17:9). In Luke, Jesus doesn’t command the disciples to be silent. They seem to be silenced by the wonder of what they have seen and heard; they are awestruck, dumbstruck by the events on the mountain.

While on the road listening to Jesus, they were slow to understand all that he was revealing to

them. Now, with a direct address from on high, they hear and they see. The veil hiding the true identity of Jesus from their view is pulled back. The curtain is lifted. They see and hear. Though they would like to build booths and stay on the mountain forever, Jesus leads them back down to the valley where they will continue their walk behind him to the cross.

I think there moments and events in life when someone says something to us or something happens to us – moments when we suddenly realize that the Divine is at work in our lives. Such moments have the power to transform, change, and transfigure our lives. The question is: When such moments occur do we hear the voice of our Still-Speaking God?

I hope so.

Blessings on Following the Way of Jesus,

Pastor Greg Rupright