

What Happens on the Mountain Cannot Stay on the Mountain
Exodus 34:27-35
Luke 9:28-43

“When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one of the things they had seen,”

While the New Year is a month old for everyone presently sipping lattes at Starbucks or shopping for Superbowl snacks in Pathmark, for those who have been called out this morning to hear a word from the Lord, for the church, the year that had its genesis just two months ago in Advent now stands on the precipice of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The season of Epiphany, the season that celebrates God’s light made manifest in the world, ends abruptly today on the mountain of transfiguration. I think of W.H. Auden’s words at the end of his Christmas Oratorio: "Already the mind begins to be vaguely aware/ Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought/ Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now/ Be very far off." Some years there are nine Sundays in the season of Epiphany; this year there are only four before the alleluias are silenced. On Wednesday, Christians will don ashes in anticipation of the season ahead, the season when darkness and death mark our lives and appear to win the day.

The story before us is enigmatic, to say the least. In order to hear a word from the Lord on the mountain where Jesus’ face changed and his clothes became dazzling white, we need to begin where the Gospel writers surely began: begin with Moses on another mountain, toward the end of the exodus of God’s people. It was after the people had tired of waiting for Moses to come down the mountain; after they fashioned a golden calf to worship in the meantime; after Moses returned to see the people running wild and so smashed the tablets that bore the words of God at the foot of the mountain; after the Lord threatened to quit this stiff-necked people; after Moses pitched his tent outside the camp, the tent of meeting where God would talk to Moses, face to face, as one talks to a friend; after Moses pled with God to accompany the people to the land God had promised and God relented, it was after all these things that Moses asked to see God’s glory. Now glory, according to Frederick Buechner, “is the outward manifestation of [God] just as holiness is the inward. . . . Glory is what God looks like when, for the time being, all you have to look at [God] with is a pair of eyes.”

I think the Gospel writers opened the scroll of the Book of Exodus before they began to write of Jesus’ transfiguration because they remembered the lonely struggle of Moses with the people and with God as he mediated between one and the other, remembered that toward the end of the exodus, he asked to see God’s glory.

Get you up to the mountain, to the cleft of the rock on the mountain, God says, and “I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you will see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” “You cannot see my face,” God says, “for no one shall see me and live.” So Moses cut two new tablets and climbed the mountain to glimpse God’s glory. God descends in a cloud and passes before Moses with words, with what are known as the thirteen attributes of God: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and sin, visiting iniquity upon the guilty. It is as though God is praying out loud for God to be God with this people again. To hear God’s words, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg says, is to see God’s back. Glory is what God sounds like when, for the time being, all you have to hear God with is a pair of ears.

I think the Gospel writers opened the scroll of the Book of Exodus before they began to write the story of Jesus’ transfiguration because they saw in the cloud and the words and the face of Jesus something of the back of God: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and sin.

In response, Moses bows and worships. Then forgetting himself and his own private glimpse of God’s glory in God’s words, Moses immediately begins to intercede on behalf of the people, beseeching God to keep covenant with them, to accompany them, to be the God he says he is. For forty days and forty nights Moses neither eats bread nor drinks water. For forty days he receives God’s words and for forty nights he wrestles with the meaning of God’s words, the words that he will take down the mountain, the words given him that the people might see God’s glory.

I think the writers of the Gospels opened the scroll of the Book of Exodus before they began to write of Jesus’ transfiguration because they heard, in the story of Moses’ wrestling with God’s word, an echo of the story they had written, thus far: Jesus’ godly glory forgotten for the sake of saving our relationship with God, his accompanying of them through the wilderness of being merely human, the forty days and nights he fasted before he opened God’s word to them, the forty days and nights ahead that would lead to the cross.

Finally, Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets and with the skin of his face shining because he had been talking with God. The light-that-God-is seemingly shown in Moses’ face, though Moses was completely unaware of the

light. When the Gospel writers tried to find words for what happened on another mountain where Jesus' face was changed and his clothes became dazzling white, I think they read and reread this story.

Both of these stories are what is known as a theophany, a story of God's shining forth, of God's manifestation to human apprehension, of God's appearing. The entire season of Epiphany is the season of God's appearing: when God's light is made manifest to shepherds in a field, to Simeon and Anna in the temple, to John in the region around the Jordan, to the devil in the wilderness, to an angry congregation in Nazareth, and to so many more in Luke's Gospel that will not fit, this year, into the four weeks between Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday.

Fast forward, literally then, to the mountain of Transfiguration, to God's glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ. According to Luke, it had been eight days since Jesus had asked the disciples who people said that he was, eight days since Peter answered, "The Messiah of God," eight days since he told them he must undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed and on the third day raised, eight days since he said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me." For Luke's readers, for the church, the eighth day is the Lord's Day, the day of his rising. On the eighth day, to give them a glimpse of God's glory, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray, to speak with God face to face, as with a friend. While he was praying, his face, like Moses' face, was changed, and the light of God's glory shone through him. Moses and Elijah join the conversation. They too are "flaming out, like shining from shook foil" with the light of God's glory: the glory that for Moses was God's speaking; the glory that for Elijah was the sound of sheer silence; the glory that now gathers to a blinding light in Jesus.

Luke alone tells us that the three are talking about the culmination of Jesus' exodus, about Jesus' deliverance of God's people—all of God's people, even the Gentiles—from death. Peter and James and John could hardly stay awake; but they kept their eyes open wide enough and long enough to see the glory—to see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the changed face of Jesus Christ. But here is the most astounding thing of all, to me, in this story: while Peter is fumbling around, trying to figure out what he should do and say in response to the sight, "a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud." That is to say, God presence came and overshadowed the disciples. They were—the church is—included in the conversation! God was about to speak to them, face to face, as one speaks to a friend. From the cloud came a voice that said, "'This is my Son, my Chosen, my Elect; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone."

All three Gospel writers tell this story of God's glory shining through Jesus, of God's cloud enveloping and including these three disciples, of God's voice speaking to them from out of the cloud. As it was with Moses, so it is with the church: God's glory is revealed to us in the words Jesus speaks and the word Jesus is. Yet it is as though, in the enigmatic details of this story, the hand of God covers us lest we see God face to face and die. Likewise, we live most days and nights in the valley with no inkling of God's glory shining out of the places where we wake and sleep, work and play, think and dream. A strange story like this can make such an encounter seem all the more improbable, unless the two ears you have to hear God with should, of a Sunday morning, actually listen to Jesus.

When I think of the people down here in the valley who do listen to him, I am constrained to report that there is a light shining out of their faces of which they are mostly unaware. Often they do not say anything of an encounter, down here in the valley; nevertheless, the light, the reflected light of God's word in them, illumines the darkness. My most recent sitting of such a person was given me the other day in staff meeting, when Brian began to speak about the experience of reading the Bible from beginning to end in preparation for passing the Bible Content Exam on Friday (Yes he did!). I tell you, his face was shining, though he was unaware of this. The words he used to describe the experience included "light": it was as though a light had dawned in his understanding and he saw the sweep of the story of salvation from beginning to end. I repeat, he was radiant and, for a moment, we all were illumined by the reflected light in his face.

"People, very ordinary human beings, with illumined faces!" Karl Barth proclaims to inmates gathered in the chapel of a Swiss prison. "Not angels in heaven, but men and women on earth...people here in Basel, here in this house! Not some special people among us, but each and every one of us! ...When a person [listens] to him, to Jesus Christ, a momentous change takes place ...It is an inward change, yet it cannot possibly remain hidden. As soon as it occurs, it presses forcefully for outward manifestation. A great and enduring light brightly dawns on such a person. This light is reflected on his face, in her eyes, in his behavior, in her words and deeds."

Thanks be to God that what happens on the mountain cannot stay on the mountain, but gives light enough for all to see, as together we make our way to the cross. Amen.