

*Transforming Encounter*

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Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, a season in which we have moved through the early ministry of Jesus, as he laid the foundation for his ministry. The major theme of Jesus' teaching has been a gospel message with two sides of the same coin. Jesus brings comfort to the comfort-less, healing to those who hurt and ache, and plenty to those who are forced to go without. At the same time, Jesus brings down the haughty, rebukes those who hoard without filling the need of their neighbor, and preaches woe to those who do not repent of complicity with worldly power and oppression. Today, on Transfiguration Sunday, our scripture readings extend us an invitation to explore how a mysterious, glorious sign adds to our understanding of Jesus' work in and through us.

There are three key elements from these two readings that will be our focus: prayer, presence, and power.

In our text from Exodus, we are with the ancient Israelites when they are encamped below Mount Sinai, not long after God delivered them from enslavement in Egypt. Our text begins with Moses coming down the mountain to the people, but it's important that we know why Moses was on the mountain in the first place. A bit earlier in the book of Exodus, Moses went to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and other core parts of what would eventually become Jewish religious law. When Moses came back down the mountain the first time, though, he found that the people, in their anxiety about not knowing how to approach God, had made a golden idol in representation. Violence and retribution ensued and in the chaos, the tablets on which the law was inscribed were broken. The relationship between God and the ancient Israelites was still in the creation process.

In take two of the story, Moses goes to the mountain top to meet God once again and has another close encounter with the Divine: closer than any other human had experienced and survived. The first thing Moses did at the summit was to pray and worship God. This is a vital similarity between the story of Moses in Exodus and Luke's passage about Jesus. Our gospel passage opens with Jesus taking Peter, James, and John with him to the top of a mountain to pray. I call our attention to this because if Moses and Jesus both responded to a mysteriously close encounter with God by praying, then prayer must be more dimensional and active than we often give it credit for. Prayer simultaneously anchors us and somehow also opens our awareness and communion to God within us and all around us. In prayer, we experience the coming together of transcendence and immanence, as the line between them grows thinner. Prayer as it is here is not something to be taken lightly. Those who flippantly and heartlessly offer "thoughts and prayers" ought to be careful if this is how we are to understand prayer.

In both passages, prayer is just one part of a powerful, mysterious, all-encompassing encounter with the Divine. Here I wish us to focus on presence: the way that God is both tangibly and intangibly present with Moses on Mount Sinai and with Jesus and the three disciples on their mountain. Traditionally, the interpretation of Jesus' transfiguration is that it provides a final epiphany-like confirmation of Jesus' divinity and ministry: Moses represents the law, Elijah represents the prophets, and Jesus is a continuation of the story. Rather than seeking factual confirmation, though, I call our attention elsewhere. We cannot know the fullness of what happened in each of these cases, so rather than getting mired down in the facts of events, one thing we do know is that God showed their presence both especially close, immanent, and at the same time transcendent. God was close enough to make Moses' and Jesus' face shine in proximity. Part of the mystery of God is that she comes close to us and yet still inspires awe and mystery. Our faith journeys are about being present to the immanent, to what God is doing in and with us and connecting that to the transcendent, what God is doing that calls us to imagine and expand and move differently.

The three disciples witness not only the presence and voice of God but also the presence of Moses and Elijah. What I take away from these two moments of physical, mystical, presence with the Divine is that God desires to be present with us not only on the mountaintop but also when we come down to get to work. We may not physically shine or experience any one, big transcendent experience, but it is not as though God was any less present to those who did not go up to the mountain top. Moses, Jesus, and the three go back down to the people after these Transfiguration experiences.

Prayer and presence are what simultaneously ground us and empower us to do the work of God that we are called to do in whichever circumstances we face. All throughout Epiphany, Jesus has been preaching that this power of God overturns the human power systems that oppress, neglect, and impoverish. Just before our passage in Luke, Jesus told the disciples that he would soon face "great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day raised again." When I try to imagine what the disciples might have been thinking after hearing that, I imagine some confusion but I also wonder if this made sense to some of them. They had seen Jesus heal and heard him preach the world-flipping gospel message enough times that some of them had to be putting together that those in power would object and perhaps even intervene to keep the message from spreading.

I think that when we read about miraculous, transcendent moments like Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai and the Transfiguration, we can sometimes take those moments too far and imagine that all was bright and shining. That was not the case. The ancient Israelites had no place to settle, needed to organize an entire society, and figure out how to relate to Yahweh, the God of their ancestors but new to them. We can remember back to a few weeks ago when we read the passage in which Jesus is misunderstood and almost thrown off a cliff in his own hometown. If we were to read through all of the gospel of Luke up to today's ninth chapter, we would read that the writer is giving us bits of information all along that show some reacting in anger and fear to the gospel message. Remember that the other side of the coin from liberating the oppressed is removing the powerful from their positions. Jesus and the three disciples

descended the mountain to people who were living under a violent, oppressive, empire. There was real work of healing and liberation then, just as we have real work of healing and liberation now. Even now, in the midst of a continuing pandemic, rampant mental and emotional health challenges, growing disparity between the rich and poor, and yet another violent international conflict exploding, the presence of God is with us now, beneath the mountain, working for justice and peace. Transformation may be easier to feel at a moment like Jesus' Transfiguration, but transformation happens in the choices we make every day. Prayer, presence, and the power of God are available to us every day. Thanks be to God, amen.