

Luke 9:28-36 2/13/10 Pastor Bill Uetricht Transfiguration

Those of you who have given birth to a baby or at least have experienced the arrival of a child into the world, those of you who have been there when someone has died, those of you who have been in the middle of a thunderstorm or those of you who have witnessed the powerful waves of Lake Michigan—you all have had that profound human experience that brings together fascination and fear. To be the parent of a new-born baby is to be mystified by life's bigness and at the same time terrified by the responsibility that lies in your hands. To watch the huge waves of Lake Michigan come crashing into the shoreline is to be awed by nature and life's power and to be afraid of the destruction they can bring.

Rudolf Otto in an old book titled **The Idea of the Holy** suggests that the experience of God involves a *mysterium tremendum et facinans*, that is, a mystery that shakes us and at the same time fascinates us. To experience God is to be in the place of fascination and fear. It is to be taken to the place of awe—the awareness of the bigness of life, and in some ways, our smallness.

Whenever we arrive at the story of the so-called “transfiguration” of Jesus I am taken to this analysis from Otto. Today we get to experience the bigness of life and God, the fascination that comes with that bigness, and the fear that accompanies the fascination. Today we are captured by awe.

Moses had been up on the mountain with God, receiving the second version of the commandments. You might remember that not too long ago he had thrown a fit after coming down from the mountain the first time with the commandments and discovering the Israelites worshiping an idol. He broke into pieces the original tablets. So he had to go back up the mountain to meet with God again and get a new version of the commandments. He's done that in today's first reading, and now he's coming back down the mountain. Totally oblivious, something my wife thinks is not unusual for men, he doesn't know that his face is shining after his little talk with God.

Moses has been in the presence of the holy. And when you are in the presence of the holy you change. Now when Aaron, his brother, and all the Israelites saw Moses, they were afraid. To be in the presence of God is not simply to be fascinated; it is to shake a little, to be in that place where life is much larger than you. Because Moses knew that that was a tough place for his people he wore a veil every time he spoke to the people after he had been in conversation with the Lord. He knew that they couldn't handle the brightness. God is really big—and unsettling.

Luke tells us that it was about eight days after Jesus had said some things about his suffering that he took his friends Peter, James, and John, up on the mountain to pray. Eight days . . . maybe an insignificant detail or maybe a flashing neon light. Could this be the Sabbath day plus one, the day of resurrection, the day of the end? Who knows for sure? But this is for sure. This is a big day because this is a day that deals with bigness. In the Bible big things often happen on mountains; they often occur in the context of prayer. They often are experienced in misty clouds or in bright lights. Luke has all of these things. This is no small event. This is big.

Jesus prays, and then he shines. His face changes, and his clothes become dazzling white. And some old guys, Moses and Elijah, start talking with him. This remarkably big thing that is happening on the top of the mountain with Jesus is not disconnected to an ancient history, an ancient story. Something big and new is happening, but that something big and new includes the ancient. That makes it even bigger to me. This is not something thought up just yesterday or today. This big thing is connected to a big history. By the way, that's why we Lutherans do worship the way we do. Our liturgy, the flow of our worship, has its roots in the worship of the ancient church. This is big stuff.

Now it's no surprise how Peter reacts to all of this big stuff. Sometimes Peter says dumb things; sometimes he isn't even aware of what he is saying. The latter seems to be the case in Luke. Before he knows it, he

has suggested to Jesus that there should be a little building program. The Jews loved it when they could have quite the party at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, setting up tents everywhere. Maybe we can duplicate that here, Peter seems to be saying. Maybe we can capture the moment. Maybe this big moment doesn't have to end.

In the midst of Peter's words comes a cloud came that overshadows Peter, James, John, Moses, Elijah, Jesus. And as they all became enveloped by the cloud, guess what happens? They became terrified. It was all so fascinating. And now it is all so terrifying. To be in the presence of God attracts and scares us.

Out of the cloud comes a voice. This we know is the voice of heaven, the voice of God. The voice is clear. The voice is resolute! This one on whom the light has shined is "my Son, my Chosen." And then the advice to the disciples is straight forward: Listen to him! And then fascinatingly enough, when the voice speaks, no one is left on the stage, except Jesus—Jesus alone.

The bigness that Moses experienced on the mountain is now experienced by Peter, James, and John *in Jesus*. In Jesus, in other words, we catch a glimpse of the really big. In Jesus, the light of God shines. To glance at Jesus is to glance at what life is all about. To listen to him is to listen to what truly matters. In Jesus we touch the deepest things in life, things that fascinate and frighten us.

To be a disciple of Jesus, to be listeners to him, is to be taken to love, forgiveness, and grace—the deepest things in life that attract us, that draw us, that free us, that truly fascinate us. Oh how marvelous it is to know the light of the love that will not let us go, the forgiveness that will not be content with our allowing the past to rule us, the grace that gifts us with worth and with meaning! That light attracts us, draws us in, fascinates us. But it also unsettles us. The love that will not let us go will also not let us go on being unloving. The forgiveness that will not be content with our

preoccupation with our pasts will also not be content with our preoccupation with other peoples' pasts. The grace that gifts us with worth and meaning will not allow us to go on thinking simply that life is about us and our accomplishments. To listen to Jesus is to be taken not only to the place that fascinates us, but also unsettles us!

Jesus' friends, as they encounter him being transfigured before their very eyes, have just been told by Jesus that he must suffer and must die. Jesus has just told his disciples that *their* lives will also involve dying—dying to themselves. The light, in other words, is shining on the one who is heading to Jerusalem to die. The light is shining on the one who tells us that true life is found not in protecting ourselves, but in dying to our self-preoccupation. Oh yes, what, or shall I say who, we meet in Jesus not only fascinates us, but also truly frightens us.

Friends, the light is shining today to center us on the one who is heading to Jerusalem. Today we are being prepared for Lent. We are being prepared to be fascinated and unsettled by the God we meet hanging on a cross.