



ACCOMPANIED BY GLORY

March 3, 2019, Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

It is hard to know what to do with the “Transfiguration of the Lord.” This event is so awesome, so filled with mystery, that anything we might offer in response seems inadequate, trite, even silly. Like Peter’s offer to build three booths to commemorate the occasion. Even Luke feels the need to apologize, explaining that Peter said this because he didn’t know what else to say. I suspect if the Transfiguration took place today, Peter would whip out his iPhone instead. In the midst of the holiness, he’d ask Elijah, Moses and Jesus to scooch in a little closer while he, James and John join them for a group ‘selfie’ to post on Instagram. The transfiguration, though, defies attempts to ‘capture’ it in words or images. It is so unique to Jesus that we can find ourselves, alongside Peter, James, and John, as *witnesses* to this moment of God’s glory, but unsure exactly what *we* are to make of it in our own lives. I mean, Jesus’ glitter does not exactly rub off on the rest of us, as his disciples then and now go on to prove. And the holy glow on the face of Moses did not exactly result in sunburn for the rest of the Israelites!

Still, the transfiguration is offered as the bright spot before we head into Lent. It is Epiphany’s culmination. These weeks of Epiphany are set between the Voice that speaks twice from heaven: First to Jesus at his baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And now on this Sunday, the Voice speaks to terrified disciples as the conversation turns to suffering and death. With urgency this time the voice says: This is my Son, Beloved and Chosen. Listen to him!”

Both texts today attempt to describe what is beyond human language—the glory of God as it intersects with earth. In the book of Exodus, the metaphors mix,



competing and contradicting in an effort to describe what cannot be named. In chapters 20-24 of Exodus, God's presence, God's glory is variously described as "thick darkness (20:21);" "a cloud that settled on Mount Sinai" (24:16); "a devouring fire on the top of the mountain" (24:17). And in the Hebrew language, the word that describes the glory permanently seared into Moses' face has been translated very differently from time to time.

When I was 7, on a visit to my grandparents, I got to sleep on the sofa in their living room. It was a great treat, out there by myself not sharing a room with my sister or brother. But on this visit, there was something new in the living room. Something—someone—was staring at me from a table across the room. It was a statue. The figure was a man. And the man had horns. And the man did not look happy. He did not look happy *at me*. I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep. It didn't work. I turned my back to him and pulled the covers up over my head. It did not help. I got up and turned *him* around, but it was useless; he was still there. I don't remember whether I went to get my parents or whether they heard my tossing and turning, but at some point they intervened. The statue ended up in a closet with a coat over him. It was Moses, Michelangelo's famous rendering of him anyway; long beard, robe, two tablets, and...two horns sticking right out of the top of his head. The Hebrew word for 'shining' is identical to the word for 'horn,' except for the vowels, which in Hebrew can be very confusing. So some interpreters, like Michelangelo, decided that Moses had sprouted horns, not light, after his close encounter with the glory of God. Every summer after that, my grandmother put away the statue when I came to visit. Moses, banished to a coat closet in Florida for 18 years. Like the Israelites, I was terrified of him.

Obscuring cloud, thick darkness, fire on the mountain, can all convey the glory of God. Most often, of course, God's glory is associated with light. Its mere reflection in Moses' face required a veil, it was so powerful. And God's glory illuminates not only the face of Jesus, but his clothes as well.

It is in the Gospel of Luke especially that the glory of God has been steadily gathering light on the way to Transfiguration Sunday. It began the first Sunday of



Advent with Luke 21, pointing us to the end of all things when people will see the Son of Man coming with power and *great glory*. It is Luke who notices this glory from the very beginning: visible to shepherds who were sore afraid as God's glory shone round about them; the angels, next, sang of God's glory in the highest heaven; then it was old Simeon's turn. Guided by the Holy Spirit we are told 3 times in as many verses, that Simeon looked into the face of the infant Jesus and declared him to be "a light to the Gentiles...and glory to God's people, Israel." Surely it was God's glory that broke open the heavens at Jesus' baptism, as the Spirit descended and the voice proclaimed him "the Beloved."

All of that gathering glory turns incandescent here as Jesus is transfigured. Luke, alone among the gospel writers, notes that *glory* appeared with Moses, Elijah, and Jesus with his dazzling face and clothes. We will not have a hint of such light, of such glory again until Easter when Luke says that two men in 'dazzling clothes' of their own stood by the empty tomb.

In the days and weeks that follow this Transfiguration Sunday, you and I will have occasion to wonder if God's glory has been snuffed out. Just three days after this luminous Sunday, we will dip our fingers into ashes, where not an ember remains, and we will confess that we are dust and will return again to dust and ash. Six weeks later, we will gather with Peter at a kindled fire of denial—all of our faces visible in that firelight, guilty of our own denials, betrayals, and failures. Even today, the lectionary gives the option of not lingering on this mountaintop of glory. We could instead have focused on the verses that follow, hurrying on down to the valley where sickness and death still have the run of the place and where we are needed, though often helpless to cure all that ails us.

But I think it is crucial to stay up here for a while, to linger in the presence of God's glory, if only for this day. We need the light, for one thing. And for another, we need to remain in glory's presence long enough to glimpse what kind of glory belongs to our God; what it can teach us as it intersects with our own lives.



In this story, Luke gives an early and singular hint that the glory of God is present, burns its brightest in the darkness, in suffering and even in death. Luke, alone among the gospel writers, ‘records’ the conversation between Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Their talk is of Jesus’ impending “departure”—for Jerusalem, the cross and the death that await him there. And the word for “departure” used here is *exodus*. With Moses there beside him, the connection is unmistakable: Jesus will accomplish a second exodus, leading people safely through the waters of death into resurrection.¹ He is leading the way for all of us to the brightness of God’s glory.

The transfiguration, as Luke tells it, this second “exodus” that leads to glory through Christ is demanding and difficult. It requires us to act with justice and to extend mercy, to love our enemies, to live in the perfect freedom of those no longer chained by slavery or sin, or even by death and all the fear death can muster. The way of God’s glory is hard for us to comprehend, much less put into words. Peter, James and John fell silent, Luke says, and in those days did not tell anyone what they had seen. In time, they will find words, of course; words that light the way for the rest of us.

Anthony Robinson is a UCC minister, teacher and writer. A few years ago he wrote of the time he spent with his sister, Regan, as she died. Diagnosed with metastatic cancer in mid-July, she passed away forty days later in late August. He described that time as a Lent lodged in summer.

Tony had retired only two weeks before his sister called with the shattering news. He drove to her home on the Puget Sound and, with her son, became a primary caregiver for the time she had left. Regan decided not to have any medical treatment, and instead live to the fullest the time she had left. She used the time well, first attending to practical matters like her will, settling funeral arrangements, and lining up a hospice team. In the evenings, for as long as she felt well, they had parties; friends came for dinner, they sat out on the deck looking at the tidal estuary, watching the endless variety of birds that came and went. They told stories, read poetry, listened to ball games on the radio and hugged a lot. Regan did not have significant pain until the last two weeks, so there was blessed time to



write notes to friends, take things she would no longer need to the thrift store, and listen to the news. There was time to talk about their childhood together and the paths each had taken in their adult lives.

In the last days, Anthony and his nephew were joined by Regan's best friend, Rhoda. They took turns sitting with her and caring for her. For her part, Regan let them care for her and share as much of the journey as they could.

Anthony concluded with this:

“During her last 40 days my sister had what I can only call a brightness. She had always had a radiant smile. It did not leave her. A handsome woman, she seemed to grow more so as those days passed. But the light of those days was not only hers. It was as if the whole time, the whole journey, were made in some light. ... There was a richness to her dying, a revelation in death. We too had been to some mountaintop, and our own faces shone from the journey.”ⁱⁱ

This must be what the transfiguration has to do with our own lives. That on the journey with Jesus from baptism until our own baptism is complete in death, there is “some light.” Some light that guides us, that gets reflected in our own faces, our own lives as we bear witness to all we have seen, and learned, and enacted in his name. The promise of scripture is that even in thick darkness and obscuring clouds, God's glory is present, a “dazzling darkness”ⁱⁱⁱ all around. We can trust that there will be richness and revelations along the way as Jesus leads the exodus toward an incandescent, indescribable, incomparable brightness where sorrow and sighing and tears will be no more. Really, you could even say—like that best wine served last at the wedding in Cana—that Jesus will save the best for the last; that with him there is always more and better still to come.

On a table across from my bed sits the statue of Moses. My grandmother gave it to me the year before she died. It no longer frightens me. Quite the contrary, it is a brightness; a daily reminder that we are accompanied by glory, and that the glory



looks different at different times in our lives, but it reflect in us and upon us, declaring that we are the beloved of God's own Beloved Son. And that we are accompanied by God's glory in every circumstance for as long as we live.

Amen.

ⁱ Heidi B. Neumark, "Altitude Adjustment" in *The Christian Century*, February 6, 2007, 16.

ⁱⁱ Anthony B. Robinson, "Luminous at the end," in *The Christian Century*, June 10, 2015, 30-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ This wonderful phrase is from Barbara Brown Taylor in an article with that title, published in *The Christian Century*, February 4-11, 1998, 1-5.