

“Reflection and Action” Rev. Michele Ward February 27, 2022
Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-43a Transfiguration Sunday Year C
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD
Luke 9:28-43 (NRSV)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus,

“Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

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

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted,

“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.”

Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.”

While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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A little over a week after Jesus preached the Beatitudes, he went away to pray. In other Gospel moments, when Jesus goes away to pray, he tends to go alone. This time, he invites three disciples to go with him: Peter, John, and James. As a prelude to the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus goes to pray, but does not want to be alone, he brings disciples along with him. All of us, even Jesus, need community. We cannot go it alone. He is not running away from the needs around him when he goes away to pray. He embraces the needs around him by seeking a place to intercede for creation.

While on the mountain, Jesus transforms during the time of prayer. His face changes appearance and his clothes shine with light. Two Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah, appear. They start talking together about what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem and everything about to happen to him the week of his death and resurrection. Peter, James, and John forced themselves to stay awake so they wouldn't miss a thing. This time, they saw everything – unlike the night Jesus invites the disciples to pray with him in the garden before his crucifixion, when they cannot stay awake, the disciples are riveted. They are in such awe of what they are witnessing they cannot help but force themselves to stay up on the mountain while Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah through the night.

But the mountain top moment with the prophets cannot last forever. Eventually Elijah and Moses get ready to leave. As they are departing from the mountain, Peter has an idea. He goes to Jesus and says, “Thank goodness we

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are here to help! James, John, and I can build some dwellings for each of you!”

A cloud from heaven surrounds Peter after he says this, including the others, and a voice comes out of the cloud, saying “This is my child, listen to him!”

After this, it’s almost like nothing had happened. Jesus is alone, his face is no longer different, his clothes no longer shine. The night has returned to its stillness and the only clouds are the ones high above in the sky. Notice that Peter makes no other comments about how convenient it is that he is there with James and John on the mountain. They stay silent for the rest of the evening, returning to prayer and eventually to sleep. They didn’t tell anyone what they experienced on the mountain that night and kept it to themselves.

When they go down the mountain, a crowd is waiting for Jesus, Peter, James, and John. A father in the crowd shouts, “My only child, my son, is sick and needs healing. Can you help him?” Jesus seems angry and grieved in his reply - he even calls the crowd ‘faithless’ and ‘perverse.’ He says, “How long must I put up with you? Bring your child here.” The demon possession Luke describes in this healing translates to what modern doctors would most likely call a seizure disorder today. Jesus heals him and returns the child to his father. The passage ends with a line like a ribbon tied around a present: Everyone was amazed at God’s greatness. The End. And everyone lived happily ever after.

The parallel of the child-parent relationship here seems quite purposeful. God calls out on the mountain to Peter to rebuke him, reminding him that Jesus is their child, and God declares to the group of disciples that Jesus is

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God’s chosen one. Now, Jesus is the one responding to the needs of a parent, and rebuking the crowd. As God’s child, Jesus offers another child healing, returning him to his family. It seems that everything is how it should be now at the end of the passage, as if Jesus has taken care of everything.

But a question lingers in the air - what will happen now? Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about what was about to happen to him in Jerusalem, about what he would accomplish there, about what the future holds for him in the not too distant future. In the space between the Sermon on the Plain and Holy Week, Jesus speaks with the patriarchs who represent the Law, Moses, and the Prophets, Elijah. In the midlands, Jesus prepares. He does not escape to another place to avoid his mission and ministry, but gets ready for the time ahead of him. He gets ready for whatever is next for him. And in this time of preparation, a father asks for healing for his only child, his son.

I often wonder what Jesus felt like as he responded to the demands on his time and his healing energy. He could have easily left for heaven for Moses and Elijah during the transfiguration. He just did the grand tour of healings and teachings with the Beatitudes and the miracle of the loaves and fishes. What else does he need to accomplish or to show people God’s love and power? But Moses and Elijah talk with him about what is next. I imagine this as a moment of decision for Jesus. Do I stay or do I go? Do I remain here and complete what is before me, even to the point of death, or can I leave now? I brought witnesses with me to see this all happen, so I don’t have to stay. Peter, James, and John could tell the others where I have gone and what I am doing

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next. It would be so easy to disappear up into heaven with Moses and Elijah, rejoin my Father, and be done with the incarnation.

Or what about Peter? I wonder how Jesus felt when Peter made the presumption that his presence mattered because of what he could do for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter, James, and John do not come with Jesus because he needs them to do anything for him. He invites them because they are in relationship with Jesus. Peter misunderstands and cannot sit in awe of what he is witnessing like James and John. He cannot be still. He jumps into action, believing that he is indispensable, believing that he must make himself absolutely important, perhaps even more important than Jesus and the rest.

Or perhaps you see yourself in the father this morning, desperate for healing, longing for God to touch your life and the lives of the people you love. Maybe you have tried everything you can, and nothing is working. Maybe you have reached your limits offering care to someone else, and do not know where else to turn. Maybe you are burnt out, hopeless, yearning for someone or something to alleviate the burden you carry.

Reflection and action go together. The transfiguration is not only about Jesus on the mountaintop, coming into contact with the patriarchs of old. It is about you and me. It is about the ways we reflect, and act, the ways we listen and learn, the ways we build more together than we can alone. It is about us, and yet it is not.