

March 3, 2019 - Transfiguration Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

All Aglow

Hang around Jesus for a while and you'll see surprising things, different things. That's what happened to the disciples in today's gospel, a story known as "The Transfiguration." Before we say anything else, we have to acknowledge that this a weird story—and weirdly recurrent. Three of the four gospels include it and it's included every year in the cycle of readings we hear in church. Whether it's the account from Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, we hear some version of this story every year, somewhere around now, these days when winter should be over but isn't, when the last thing you want is more cold, when you are really ready for some different weather—that's where we are today, for this weird story and the very different things that happen in it: the light, the voice, the conversation with dead people.

Surreal as all that is, when you think about it, it's also surprising that the disciples were surprised! That it took them that long to see Jesus like that, to see how different he was, how he shone. They've been with him for some time and he's been doing and saying brilliant things. It's not even the first time a voice from heaven pointed this out—remember his baptism? The disciples should have seen Jesus glowing much, much earlier—would have, if they'd seen pictures of him as a baby. You've seen baby pictures of Jesus, right? There's lots of them, been painted throughout the centuries. If you've seen them you know that baby Jesus had a halo, he's had a shine to him since his birth, artists know that. But the disciples didn't, not for some time, not until the Transfiguration. Until this moment on the mountain, they didn't see the glow.

It took a while for Moses to see the glow. Moses is also mentioned in the Transfiguration story, one of the dead people with whom Jesus converses. But long before this scene, Moses had his own mountaintop experience. We heard about this in the two other readings today, Moses' glow is mentioned in the book of Exodus, and also in second Corinthians. Both Biblical passages note that when Moses was up on a mountain, getting the law, his face shone.

But we might also recall that's not how Moses appeared from the get-go. This is what I mean when I say that it took a while for Moses to see the glow. His shining moment took some time in arriving. He did not have a glowing resume. He wouldn't even recommend himself for the job God had in mind for him: leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Moses didn't think he could do that. He wasn't much of a public speaker. He had a rough past. In his younger days, he had gotten into trouble with the law (which is putting it lightly, he killed a guy), and then he ran away. He found himself in middle age, in the middle of nowhere, in a place called Midian, doing a middling job. It must have been numbingly repetitive, tending someone else's herds, out in the wilderness. And then one day he came upon a bush that was blazing, but not disintegrating; on fire, but not being consumed. This shrub was brilliantly shining, all aglow, right there in the midst of the same old cold, this different thing. It must have been weird to see it.

It might have been some time before he saw it. Had he passed by this bush before? Did it just start burning that day? People have asked these questions. In the history of Jewish Biblical exegesis there's this thing called midrash, midrash being ancient and ongoing conversations about Biblical texts, interpretations that explore what a story might mean by examining its gaps, its silences, and asking questions. In a midrash on the burning bush, the rabbis ask, "How long was the bush burning before Moses saw it?" If you think about it, the bush could have been

burning for a very long time, since, although it was on fire, it wasn't being consumed. That being the case, the bush could have been burning for a long time before Moses saw it. The rabbis say the bush had been burning for a very, very long time: for 400 years. That is, for the entire time that the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. That bush started on fire the moment an Egyptian first enslaved his Hebrew neighbor, and kept on burning, until, finally, after all that time, after all that misery and monotony, after all his evasions and excuses, finally, Moses saw it.

How much like Moses we are. How many years has the bush been burning? How many years has injustice raged? How long until we get over ourselves, get over our past, get over our insecurities, and see the blaze, hear God calling us? Do we think God doesn't know what we've done, or what we are like? Do we think God is going to give up, because we've got issues? Do we think they are too much for God to overcome?

How much like the disciples we are. How slow to perceive. How weighed down with sleep, while filled with terror. How long until we heed the voice from heaven, "This is my Son, listen to him"? How long until our fears and our faults are transfigured into hope, and action?

It will take some time; it takes spending time with God. Moses' face changed after he received the law. It was then that he started to glow. It took some time before the disciples saw Jesus, glowing. It took him being on a mountain and having a conversation with Moses and Elijah. It took them seeing the connection and continuity with Jesus and the law and the prophets, with all that happened in the history of Israel. It took the disciples hearing Jesus conversing with the dead, unafraid of death, talking with past liberators about his own coming "departure." You should know that the word "departure"—that's in the version we heard today, that's how it's translated into English, but you should know that when it says that Jesus was speaking of his "departure," the literal word there is "exodus."

It will take some time for us to see the glow, it will take spending time with God. Do that, hang around Jesus for a while—as the Bible says, he is the very image of God. Spend time with Jesus and you'll see what God is like and what God does, how different that is from what passes for life in our daily grind.

Keep company with Jesus and you'll also see something different, in others. You'll see God's image in them, too—for that is how we are created, every one of us, male and female. We are all created in the image of God. You can see it in our baby pictures, can you not? When I see a baby it is so very clear to me, that affirmation at the very beginning of the Bible: that we are created in the image of God. That image of God in us never goes away, though so often we are slow to see it, or stop seeing it, or avoid it, or enslave it.

Hang around with Jesus and see it, see the glow that God bestows, not just on one person, one shrub, but on all people, all of creation, all aglow, a brilliance occurring and recurring everywhere. "Earth's crammed with heaven," as the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit round and pluck blackberries." Hang around with Jesus and see the glow, see the blaze, and be transfigured, as second Corinthians says, "see the glory of the Lord ... and be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."