

Sermon Notes from CMJ

Last Sunday of Epiphany - Feast of the Transfiguration - Year B

Readings - 2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50:1-6, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

ACNA Readings - 1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 27; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Mark 9:2-9

Introduction - The transfiguration of Jesus is such an important event that it occurs twice in the liturgical year: once in the season after Pentecost, where it seems more chronologically accurate, and here before the season of Lent, where it seems chronologically out of place. The story of the transfiguration is so familiar to us, occurring in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, that we must be careful not to miss the significance of the details.

Common Theme - There are many themes to consider in the texts this week, themes of light, glory, and transformation – not only of Jesus but also of the disciples and of ourselves. And perhaps most important is the theme of hearing the voice of God and the effect that voice should have on our lives.

Hebraic Perspective - Jesus hears the voice from heaven on two occasions, his baptism and his transfiguration. The rabbinic world calls a voice from heaven the *bat kol* (literally “daughter of the voice”), and it refers to the supernatural way in which God communicates to his creation after the time of the prophets had ended. Early rabbinic Judaism taught that God continued to participate in his creation through the *shekhinah* and that the *bat kol* would go forth from Mount Sinai every day (Pirke Avot 6:2). In the Middle Ages, it was taught that the *Hasidim* – that is the devout, pious people – would be able to hear the *bat kol* on regular occasions. The point is that, in the background of the New Testament, there was a strong tradition and belief that God still spoke to his people.

First Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12 - This passage depicts the transition of the prophetic role from Elijah to Elisha. Elijah is about to depart the world in a whirlwind and flaming chariot. At first, we see Elijah attempting to distance himself from Elisha, who refuses to leave his master’s side. So they travel to Bethel to encounter a company of prophets who were residing there. We should recall that Bethel was one of the major centres of Israelite idolatry. Golden calves had been established in the false temples of Dan and Bethel since the days of Jeroboam I. However this text does not mention the idolatry but rather of a school of prophets. This leads to many questions. Out of all the places to establish a school of prophecy in Israel, why Bethel? What were they doing there? Did they challenge the false temple that was so obviously in front of them? The text doesn’t give any details. We also note prophets located in Jericho, a city that the Lord had commanded never to be rebuilt upon pain of death, and in Moab across the Jordan, in a land of the enemies of Israel.

Light shines brightest when the darkness is the darkest. We see from these verses that God places his prophets where there is the greatest darkness. The prophets of God are right next to the pagan false temples and the houses of rival worship. God sends his heroes into a cursed city that was forbidden and establishes a prophetic school. In the mortal enemy lands God will place his heroes. Elisha’s first miracle will occur in the lands of Moab. This describes something wonderful about the character of God. He never gives up on His people or on the world that He created. God is not afraid of the darkness. He will send His light to shine in those places all the brighter.

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Second Reading: Psalm 50:1-6 - This psalm is attributed to Asaph and is traditionally part of the *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) liturgy. The opening lines remind us that God indeed speaks. He is not silent. Instead, his word goes out to all the world. Light accompanies his voice as God shines forth in perfection. The light is paired with the all-consuming fire as we are reminded also that God is a judge and he will bring justice to the earth.

Third Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 - It is not the gospel's fault that people are perishing. People perish for lack of vision (Prov 29:18), and people perish because they can't see the light, yet it shines so brightly. Satan, the god of this age, works to blind us to the truth, but we are not innocent victims. The term "god of this age" does not occur anywhere else in scripture. This is not code for dualism; Satan (which means "adversary") is not an equal deity to the God of heaven. God and Satan might be opponents, but they are not equals. Satan's only strength is a lie, which is the opposite of God, who is truth. While truth and lies are opposites, they are not equals. Satan's power rests only on those who do not believe. The light of God's truth, his redemptive power, his healing power, his great love are all epitomized in the power of creation itself. For before creation there was only darkness, and God said, "Let there be light," and the power of light chased away the darkness, as it always does.

Fourth Reading: Mark 9:2-9 - In the context of Jesus' ministry, he had gathered disciples and was becoming popular. He was teaching the kingdom, healing, defeating demons, performing miracles, challenging the status quo. The people love him, so things seem to be going well. All of a sudden Jesus takes a small group of disciples privately up a tall mountain. Origen, one of the church fathers, says it was Mount Tavor, although another more probable site is Mount Hermon.

One of the things we can learn from this is that not everyone gets to see a miracle. Jesus has many disciples, most of whom remain at the base of the mountain. Only Peter, James, and John witness the miracle of the transfiguration. Later, they betray, abandon and deny Jesus like the other disciples who did not witness the transfiguration. Miracles are great, but they do not save people.

Moses and Elijah also appeared in this event. Origen, who loved allegory, said they represent the Law and the Prophets. Since Origen, that is the way the majority of commentators relate to this event. However, Moses was also a prophet and Elijah did not write a prophetic book. Isaiah is actually the largest prophetic book containing the majority of messianic promises, and Elisha gains a double portion of Elijah's power and performs twice as many miracles. Origen's allegory is perhaps flawed. Moses and Elijah both have roles to play in the messianic kingdom. One like Moses is coming (Deut 18), and Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4). Something eschatological is occurring. Moses and Elijah confirmed Jesus' messianic identity. God intervened again in human affairs, and his light is about to defeat the darkness once more.

Hebrew Context - The transfiguration narrative is very reminiscent of the Exodus event and the theophanies on Mount Sinai. In both scenes, we see a mountain, a cloud, lights, and fire; and in both cases, we also hear the voice of God. On Mount Sinai, Moses had requested to see God's glory. Instead, God replied that He would show Moses His goodness. God is good, and his being is full of

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goodness. The goodness of God reflects his glory. Glory in Hebrew is *kavod*, the same word that means “heavy.” What is God heavy in? He is heavy in purity, beauty, mercy, power, and goodness. He is heavy in light, which has no room for darkness. The transfiguration shows us that the Messiah is also glorious, full of light, power, and goodness and that in his goodness he will suffer for us. His preparation for his suffering is the glory of the transfiguration. As the Gospel of John says, “the Word made His dwelling among us and we beheld His glory” (John 1:14).

ACNA Addendum

1 Kings 19:9-18 - The ACNA lectionary chooses another mountain top experience to pair with the Gospel reading. Elijah was at a low point, despite the miracles that he had partaken in and the defeat of the false prophets of Baal. Once again we note that miracles do not save people, nor do they provoke faith, even for mighty prophets. Elijah had traveled 40 days to Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai), where he stood, as Moses did, in the presence of the Lord. And God spoke. The voice that Elijah heard was a gentle voice, barely a whisper. And he was encouraged by this voice, as we all can be by the voice of God. The encouragement is to hear that we are not alone. While the enemy lies to us to convince us of our frailty and to instill loneliness and despair, this remains just a lie. We are not alone. We belong to the largest fellowship in all history, the Kingdom of Heaven. There are 2 billion people on earth in that kingdom today.

Psalms 27 - In this Psalm of David, he pairs light with salvation. When the scriptures speak of light, it is not in reference to normal light, say the light of a candle or a fire. Rather they speak of the light of creation. That light is powerful, creative, defeats darkness, and brings with it comfort and salvation. While verses 2-5 acknowledge the evil that is around, hope remains in the salvation of God. Light always chases away darkness, and David has confidence that he will again see the goodness of God.

2 Peter 1:13-21 - Faith is not a fable, as the skeptics will challenge us. We do not believe in myths and legends. Our faith is also based on eyewitness accounts recorded in the Gospels and epistles of the early disciples of the Messiah. The prophetic message of the Redeemer is a message of light and of hope. Without God and without a redeemer, this world is hopeless. Evolution teaches that the ultimate end of the universe is a cold, dark heat death¹, and there is nothing that can prevent this from happening. What a depressing vision for the future! However, the prophetic message of the Lord, the Gospel of the Messiah, is full of goodness, of hope, and of light that chases away despair, bringing life from the darkness. As Peter ends this passage, this hope comes from the very voice of God himself carried along for us by the Holy Spirit. Truly the message we have is glorious (*kavod*), heavy in purity and beauty, mercy and hope.

¹ “This is also known as the ‘Big Chill’ or ‘Big Freeze’ because the universe will slowly cool as it expands until eventually it is unable to sustain any life.” “WMAP- Fate of the Universe,” 2015, https://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/uni_fate.html.

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