

Our Moments of Transfiguration

(Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-43a)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, March 3, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Among this morning's assigned Lectionary readings we find two remarkable scenes (three, actually, since I chose to disregard the brackets in the reading from Luke when making the choices for this service).

In our first, from Exodus, we encounter the prophet Moses who has gone up the mountain to speak with God and receive the tablets. In Luke, we witness Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop and talking with Moses and Elijah ... the two who by this point have become representative of the Law and the Prophets. And then, later in the same Gospel passage, we see Jesus called upon by a desperate father seeking healing for his afflicted child.

These readings contain a wealth of riches waiting to be uncovered by preachers, and there are many directions someone in the pulpit could go. A comparison, for instance, between the voice of God speaking from a cloud to draw attention to his Son and the father shouting from among the crowd to draw attention to *his* son. Perhaps looking at the similarities between the shining face of Moses and the shining presence of Jesus. And there are many, many others. But what I want to consider ... and what I kept returning to as I reflected on today's readings ... was the question of where the bigger changes take place. Were they in those placed directly in front of us – in Moses, Jesus and the child? Or were the more important changes in fact somewhere else?

In our passage from Exodus we read that Moses was quite literally shining when he came down from the mountain carrying the tablets ... "giv[ing] off some sort of supernatural radiance."¹ In the Luke reading, as Jesus stood on top of the mountain, the clothes he was wearing suddenly turned a brilliant shade of white and the appearance of his face changed (one translation of the Greek I read is that "the appearance of his face (became) other"²). And then later in the same reading, the young boy to whom we are introduced is suddenly and miraculously relieved of his affliction by Jesus and restored to health

But I do not think those are the biggest changes. I do not think the changes are simply in Moses and Jesus and this child. No, for me the most incredible moments of transformation in these scenes ... these miraculous instances of transfiguration ... are actually those that occur within the people witnessing the events.

¹ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary – The Five Books of Moses*, p. 352 (footnote on v. 30).

² Joseph Fitzmyer. *The Gospel According to Luke: I-IX*, p. 798.

Look at how they responded. Those who encountered Moses after his time on the mountaintop with God were afraid to come near him. After witnessing Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, Peter in his unrestrained excitement blurted out that this was all good and that they should build three dwellings (likely similar to the huts or tents used by shepherds and nomads³) on that spot so that the three great men could stay for a while. And the people who watched the healing of the young boy were quite simply in the words of the Gospel writer “astounded at the greatness of God.”⁴

Fear. Joy. Astonishment. These are the emotions felt by those witnessing each of these incredible moments. But I think these responses were rooted not simply in the fact that they were ***watching*** the events unfold, but rather in that they were ***seeing*** Moses and Jesus and this young child in entirely new ways. The Moses who went up the mountain was to them not the same when he came down. The Jesus who climbed up with his disciples one day was to them not the same when they went back down the next. The suffering child who was brought by his father to see Jesus that day was not the same when he returned home.

What had changed was not the appearance of Moses, Jesus and the child, but the way they were ***perceived*** by others. All three underwent physical changes – shining, changed faces; brilliant, bright clothing; physical affliction to physical peace – but the deeper changes were those inside the people surrounding them. An encounter with God; a conversation with two of the patriarchs; a miraculous healing: these were the entryways into not just seeing these individuals, but seeing God at work ***in*** and ***through*** them. And in seeing these incredible moments, they themselves were forever changed.

Yesterday I was privileged to witness moments of transfiguration in five men and women ordained to the transitional diaconate by Bishop Susan Goff. Years of discernment, prayer and conversation; challenging seminary coursework; chaplaincy programs and parish internships; ordination exams: all of them were leading to this moment when they took their first vows in the service of the Church.

Often in describing ordinations you will hear people use the phrase “ontological change,” which is a flashy theological term for what is a change in the essence of a person. The men and women who were ordained have always been and continue to be ... as are each one of us ... beloved children of God. But they are experiencing a new state in that being ... the way, to use a practical scientific example, water can exist as a liquid, solid or gas.

Yesterday, these five new deacons kneeling before the altar at Church of the Good Shepherd in Burke were transformed. But from the pews, I watched an even bigger transformation take place: a transformation in the friends and family gathered there. We all were ***watching*** these people we hold close take their vows and move further into their new vocation, but after the

³ Fitzmyer, p. 801.

⁴ Luke 9:43a (NRSV).

laying on of hands by the Bishop we were **seeing** them in a new way. As with those watching Moses, Jesus and the young boy, we were seeing God at work **in** and **through** them. As you look at those you encounter in your lives, when do you experience moments of transfiguration? Do you ever find yourself so invested in a situation ... so caught up in a particular place or time ... that you are not just simply **watching** events unfold, but actually **seeing** them on a deeper level and with a deeper vision?

I want to issue a challenge for you this week; consider it a suggestion for a Lenten practice in which you can engage. At the end of each day, pick one moment on which you spend some time reflecting. It could be a moment that brought up a similar response to those felt by those in today's readings ... fear, or joy, or astonishment. Consider what happened in front of you ... and then consider what happened **to** you.

In that moment, you will see God revealed, working ... **through** that moment and **in** you.

And when you find that, you will find your transformative moment ... your moment of **transfiguration**.

Amen.