

Just Look at Their Bright Shining Faces!
Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36
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Transfiguration Sunday is, after Ascension Day, perhaps the least known and understood of the special days of the church year, to the majority of Protestant Christians. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches celebrate it in high style, but we Protestants can't even agree what Sunday of the year it should be, some choosing the traditional day of August 6 and others choosing, today, the final Sunday of the Season of Epiphany, also known as the last Sunday before Lent. At least Ascension Day has the excuse that it always falls on a Thursday. But Transfiguration Sunday has a remarkably low profile, for such a mountaintop experience. Its low profile may have to do with the fact that we have really just celebrated Christmas, and are already looking forward to Easter, and that the Transfiguration story isn't really very climactic in the overall drama of the Gospels. It's a very important part of the story, but it just doesn't quite have the gravitas of some of the other episodes in Scripture, despite how mysterious and strangely beautiful it is.

I am tempted simply to read to you the 15th chapter of the book of First Corinthians, and call it a night, since it is, I believe, an unintentional commentary on the Transfiguration of Jesus. I say that because I believe that what Peter and James and John witnessed on the mountaintop was a glimpse of Jesus as he would become following his resurrection, and indeed what we will become following the

resurrection that is promised to us in Jesus Christ. And that is the subject matter of First Corinthians 15: the form, and appearance, and matter, so to speak, of the resurrection body. Perhaps you've engaged in one of those great speculative conversations about what we will look like when we are resurrected. Will we look like we did at our prime? I certainly hope so! Or will we look as we did at the moment of our death? Or as we wished we had looked? Or as others saw us? Or as God sees us? If we were bald in life, will we still be bald in the resurrected life? If we had a limp, or poor eyesight, or terrible taste in clothing during our lifetimes, will we be stuck with all that for all eternity? Or will we simply look like little Jonathan and Francisca did tonight, with their bright shining faces?

You did see their little faces shining, didn't you, as they were baptized? If not, perhaps you need a checkup on your spiritual eyes. The shining you saw was not their smiles, or the reflected tears of their parents. No, we were in the presence of God, not that Frankie and Johnny are God, but that we were present in a moment of divine presence, sort of like we heard happened to Moses when he would go up on the mountaintop to be with God. Certainly we are often in the presence of God, but I think we are closest to experiencing what Jesus' Transfiguration was all about, and witnessing what our transfigurations will be about, when we witness a baptism. Let me explain that a little.

The Transfiguration story in Luke is sandwiched between two revelations of Jesus' impending death; twice he tells the disciples clearly what is going to happen

to him. Yet, the Transfiguration experience is about life, eternal life, as represented by Moses and Elijah – seen “in glory” it says – and a Jesus who looks completely different from when we walked up the mountain alongside the three disciples. It is a divine meeting with divine possibilities, but not one with dead participants. I think the disciples, and we, are meant to understand that amidst all the talk of death, we receive a glimpse of the future, a glimpse of our own resurrection, and a glimpse of those resurrected bodies.

Now, what is it that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about up there? It says they were talking about Jesus’ “departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem,” and we are to infer from that they are referring to his death, especially because we have just heard Jesus announce that the “Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Beyond that it confirms what Jesus has just said, what is interesting about that divine conversation is the word we have translated here as “departure.” That word is interesting because it translates a Greek word more commonly translated as “exodus,” a word which recalls so much of God’s presence with God’s people, and so much of Moses’ life, of course, as he lead the Hebrews through the waters in their Exodus from Egypt, and so much of Elijah’s life, as he tried to lead his people out their slavery to idolotry, tried to lead an Exodus of the Kings from the ways their grieved God and punished their own poor. And of course it describes our own personal passages from death to life, from

bondage to freedom, from punishment to grace, all in the Jesus Christ whose own exodus through his death and resurrection accomplished our own exoduses. And isn't that exactly what we celebrate in baptism?

In baptism, we celebrate what Christ has done for us. In baptism, we celebrate our passage from death to life. In baptism, we celebrate our rejection of sin, and God's help in accomplishing that rejection. In baptism, we celebrate God's grace that calls us and leads us through the waters. There was only one Exodus from Egypt, only one crossing of the parted seas. There is only one baptism, our baptism in Jesus Christ, and only one baptism in water for each of us. And that moment is our Exodus, and we are changed, and in the midst of our death to sin we celebrate our rising to life. That's why I think moments like baptism are the moments in our life and faith which offer us a glimpse of the new life we are promised, and we see the faces of those baptized shining as if they were in the very presence of God, which indeed they are.

You hear me talk about baptism frequently, certainly more frequently than we celebrate baptisms here. One reason I do that is that it is one thing all the traditions from which we come have in common; we all baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity. But I also do it because I believe it is such an important sign and seal of God's grace in our lives, that we are foolish not to remember it more often. Often taking place a long time ago, or so young in our lives that we do not remember them, our baptisms easily slip away into that category of overlooked

ritual, kind of like the very day of Transfiguration Sunday, important, yet not as climactic as some of the other more compelling moments of our lives, despite how mysterious and strangely beautiful it is. It is clear that what Jesus wants to reveal to his disciples, that he must suffer, die, and be raised again, is concealed in the minds of the disciples; Peter wants to build booths – he misses the point of the Transfiguration he witnessed. Later, after Jesus has announced it once again, they again don't understand: Luke tells us that "its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it." Later of course, we know that they do understand everything, and so we know it is possible for us to perceive everything about Christ, in all its power. And all this makes me wonder how clearly we understand the power and significance of our baptisms.

If our baptisms are a foretaste of our eternal life, it seems to be that we should appear to be transfigured all the time, our faces shining for all the world to see. But more than simply being transfigured on the outside, we should be transformed on the inside, and seeing the world differently, just as others are seeing us differently. Thomas Merton, the famous twentieth century Trappist monk, had an experience that I think captures both the transfiguration and transformation we are privileged to enjoy through baptism. He says,

“I was in Louisville, Kentucky, in the shopping mall, when I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people around me, even though they were complete strangers. It felt like waking from a dream. It was as if I could see the secret beauty in their hearts, the deep self where sin and ego can't reach, the core of their reality, the person that each is in God's eyes. I couldn't explain it. How can you go up to people and tell them they're walking around shining like the sun? If only they could see themselves as they truly are. If only we could all see each other that way all the time. I suppose the problem would be that we'd fall down and worship each other.”

Merton saw the people in the mall as God saw them. I don't think that's possible any other way than passing through the waters of baptism. Just as we witnessed it today on the faces of Jonathan and Francisca, may the whole world comment upon seeing us, “Why, just look at their bright shiny faces, and their hearts full of love.” And as we see others through the eyes of love, may we say, “Why, just look at their bright shiny faces, and their hearts full of love.” Amen.