

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:13-21

Luke 9:28-36

There probably isn't anybody in this room who hasn't been faced with some task or some life event that they felt sure they were not going to be able to do. Even among the youngest of us, there are life experiences that cause us to worry or to be anxious. Something as seemingly harmless and easy as moving into the next grade in school or graduating from high school or leaving home or starting a new job can seem insurmountable to us at the time ... like an impossible mission. And maybe it's not a life event that we're facing. Maybe it's a goal we've set for ourselves or a dream that has somehow taken hold of us. After we have accomplished something that had once seemed impossible, we can look back at all the twists and turns and all the folks who helped us along the way ... even those who helped us without knowing it! We get support from others. We get inspiration from others. We lift up prayers to God. People we trust and admire lend us their confidence by believing in us when we don't believe in ourselves. And we make up our mind at the outset and at many points along the way that we aren't going to give up ... no matter what! We can outright fail, but we aren't going to throw in the towel.

It rarely occurs to us to think of Jesus as needing help and support along the way, but surely he did. That's one of the insights from our gospel reading this morning. Many of us are familiar with the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, but we may not have taken it apart to explore the several messages for us buried inside.

Jesus has taken Peter and James and John with him to the top of the mountain. At the top of the mountain we can see in all directions. We can see where we have been and we can see where we are going. Modern man has designated Mt. Tabor as the particular mountain, but we aren't quite sure that's the one. The identity of the mountain is not what's important. It's the identity of Jesus that is revealed to us on the mountaintop that's important. And in this scripture passage, the identity of Jesus is clearly revealed to Peter and James and John and to us.

It's not unusual for historic figures in the Bible to seek prayer with God on a mountain top. Moses did it when he climbed Mt. Sinai and received the ten commandments. A cloud enveloped the top of the mountain while he was there and the people below thought the top of the mountain was on fire. When Moses descended from the mountaintop, his face shone so brightly after his encounter with God that it frightened the people and he had to wear a veil. Elijah did it when he climbed Mt. Horeb and hid in a cave to escape the angry Israelites who

were furious with him for confronting them with God's disappointment in them. They were intent on killing Elijah, but God came to him on the top of the mountain ... preceded by life-threatening wind and earthquakes ... and God provided Elijah with the strength and the courage to descend the mountain and return to the people.

The mountaintop is metaphorically the closest that human beings can get to God. But it's not the only place where an experience with God can take place. It's not the place, but the action of praying that allows us to gain access to an experience of God. Prayer isn't just a laundry list of all the things we want God to do for us or to even just to tell God how grateful we are for what he has done for us or to let God know how distraught we are. Prayer is the way we spend time with God, which means some of the time while we are in prayer, we need to be silent. Prayer is a conversation. Prayer is our way of being with God in much the same way we might be with a dear friend or close family member. Prayer is our way of communicating with God and one way that God communicates with us. It's how we tend to our relationship with God in much the same way that we tend to our human relationships. And it is in these conversations, both human and divine, that we often get what we need most. We get affirmation that we are loved. We get strength and encouragement for the journey. We get reprimanded or rebuked for wrongdoing. We get confirmation about what God has planned for us. And we get peace and reassurance that we are not alone.

While Jesus is praying at the top of the mountain, he is joined by Moses and Elijah. They have been dwelling with God, so they know the heart and mind of God. Their faces shine with the reflection of the glory of God. They talk with Jesus about his departure ... the Greek word is 'exodus' ... from earth. Jesus is approaching the most difficult part of his mission here on earth. His mission has been two-fold: to reveal the nature of God to human beings and to experience human death and all the sinfulness of human beings so that all human beings can be reconciled and reconnected to God. He's here to redeem us all, but in order to do that, he must go through literal hell to pave the way for us.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus is both human and divine. He experiences all the human emotions that we do without the necessity to act on any of them. While conferring with a radiant Moses who represents the Law and an equally radiant Elijah who represents the Prophets, Jesus' mission is confirmed. Jesus is, after all, the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets. It is appropriate for him to be in conversation with Moses and Elijah at this particular moment in his own journey. Moses and Elijah bring God's reflected glory with them to the conversation and they confirm both God's love for Jesus and God's mission for Jesus. They also bring God's strength, already in Jesus, to the forefront.

Moses and Elijah are reflecting God's glory, but Jesus himself is the source of divine glory. The glory that shone in him is God's glory coming from within. This metamorphosis of Jesus ... this

transfiguration ... this change in Jesus ... is what cements his resolve to follow through with his mission. He has now been fortified for the remainder of the journey that lies ahead ... the mission that seems utterly impossible to us.

It's no accident that Moses and Elijah are with him. As the three of them are conferring together on the top of this mountain, it occurs to us to notice that this is not a solitary experience for Jesus. Moses and Elijah are part of Jesus' community and community is important. Community is one of the bedrocks of the Christian faith. Jesus himself told his followers that whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be present. The divine glory that transfigures Jesus is a combination of his own internal divinity and the reflected glory of God in Moses and Elijah. Even though Jesus knows perfectly well what lies ahead for him, the conversation with Moses and Elijah provides him with the reinforcement and the strength he needs. Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem to complete his mission with unshakable resolve and determination. Nothing less is required to get the job done.

As Peter and James and John are struggling to make sense out of what their eyes are seeing, a cloud descends on the top of the mountain and envelopes all of them. From the cloud comes a voice that says, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." That voice is unmistakable confirmation of who Jesus really is. And we are given an imperative from God: "Listen to him!" We are instantly reminded of Jesus rising out of the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit descending on him as a dove and a voice saying from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

We have in the Transfiguration another revelation of the true identity of Jesus. In the Incarnation, we recognize that the divine has taken on the human condition. In the Transfiguration, the human shares in divine glory. In the Incarnation, the Son of God takes on human form and resides with us mortals on earth. In the Transfiguration, the earthly Jesus shares for a moment the company of two great and worthy residents of heaven and reveals the divinity that dwells within him.

And we are reminded by this story of the Transfiguration that the way to glory for Jesus, and subsequently for us, does not take a detour around the cross. The way to heavenly glory is always through Jesus and through the cross. We can't avoid the cross on our way to heaven. We are indebted to Jesus for completing this impossible mission on our behalf. It is a mission that we are truly incapable of completing on our own. We are the children of God and beneficiaries of Jesus' completion of this impossible mission. And what we inherit is life eternal.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.