

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

I'm a sucker for a good play! I just love the theater. There's something about getting lost in a story with the players right in front of you. A play is happening in real time. If someone makes a mistake, there's no going back and 'shooting' it again. Whatever got done or said is the way it is...and everyone on stage and everyone in the audience just has to make the best of it. Luckily, that doesn't happen very often. Good actors don't forget their lines. And unless you're going to the local high school for the Senior Play, there's not much chance that you'll see an actor flub the lines. Although, when it happens, it's very interesting to see how people get out of the mistake. Everyone has to shift gears...the one who made the mistake and all the other players involved in the scene. Sometimes it turns out to be better than the original!

For the last seven weeks, we've been immersed in a very interesting play of sorts. Each Sunday we have been given a bit more information about the authentic identity of the man named Jesus. It turns out that he's quite extraordinary, although not everyone who sees him or hears him has figured that out. We are getting closer and closer to the end of the play. All of us know the climax, but let's not go there just yet.

Among the first ones outside Jesus' familiar circle of friends and family to identify him as the long-awaited Messiah are the three Wise Men from the East who find the baby Jesus quite a long way from his home and theirs. But someone else *before* the wise men recognizes who Jesus is when Jesus is just a few weeks old. Simeon, a devout and righteous man who spent most of his time at the Temple, had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the long-awaited Messiah. When Mary and Joseph came inside the Temple with the child Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms and immediately began thanking God for keeping the promise. There was also a prophet at the Temple named Anna, a prophet from the tribe of Asher, working there. She was eighty-four years old and she knew who Jesus was. The moment she saw the baby, Jesus, she began telling everyone about the child who would grow up to be the savior of Israel....the long awaited Messiah. She had no doubts. She was certain.

We mark the beginning of the Season of the Epiphany with the arrival of the Wise Men and this season ends with the Transfiguration...the Scripture passage that we heard this morning. Despite the fact that Jesus is well into his ministry and several of his disciples, most especially

Peter, have identified Jesus as the Messiah there are still plenty of doubters among those who travel with Jesus and those who encounter him for the first time. So, Transfiguration Sunday is always the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. That's the Sunday that closes out the lessons about the identity and mission of Jesus.

Now this is a strange and unusual story. Jesus has been preaching and teaching and healing all over Galilee and Capernaum and even in Samaria. The disciples have witnessed some extraordinary...even spectacular...healings at the hands of Jesus. And he speaks often about God and the Kingdom of God. He teaches those who will listen to him about the way God wants them to behave and in most instances it's quite a stark departure from what people usually do. He tells people that they should do good to people who mistreat them; they should love their enemies; if someone strikes them on the cheek, they are to turn the other one. They are to do good to people who hurt them and the disciples themselves are supposed to love one another in the same way that Jesus loves each of them which gets difficult at times because they hold a variety of different opinions.

In the experience we hear about today, Jesus chooses Peter and James and John to hike with him to the top of the mountain. Being selected to go on a special errand with Jesus must have made all three of them feel very important. Mountaintops are always where Jesus goes to do his most earnest communion with God. After spending most of the day hiking up to the top of the mountain, Peter and James and John are exhausted. Once they stop moving it isn't long before each of them falls asleep. We don't know what time of day this extraordinary event for Jesus took place. It could have been at high noon when the sun is brightest or it could have been in the evening when the sun is beginning to set or it could have been in full darkness. Regardless of what the sun was doing or how much natural light there was, a powerful spiritual experience occurred while Jesus was praying. The appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. He was luminescent. All of a sudden there were two men standing with Jesus: one was Moses and the other was the Prophet Elijah. The three of them were discussing Jesus' departure in Jerusalem that they referred to as his exodus. The conversation was reminiscent of Moses having led the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. Jesus was about to lead the people...*all* the people...out of their bondage of sin through his death and resurrection.

Peter woke up while Elijah and Moses and Jesus were still talking. Peter didn't want this experience to end. He wanted the three of them to stay together always, so he suggested that they build a dwelling place for each one...Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. While Peter was trying to talk Jesus into this plan a large cloud descended on them. They must not have been able to see anything as they entered the cloud because the scripture says they were terrified. And then

from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the cloud lifted, Jesus was alone. Moses and Elijah were no where in sight. Peter and James and John told no one what they had seen and heard. But the experience they had at the top of the mountain was one that had to have shaken each one of them to the core. The three of them ended up being the audience for the most powerful summit meeting that had ever been held: Jesus, Moses and Elijah preparing for Jesus' departure from this earth.

Being told about this experience is almost more than we bargained for. If Moses and Elijah were standing with Jesus and talking to him, they must have been occupying recognizable bodies. That fact alone can give us hope for life after death, perhaps not as we know it here and now, but some form of recognizable existence. From our vantage point...long after Jesus' death and resurrection...we can add new meaning and understanding to some of the things that Jesus explained to his disciples that they could not understand.

We sometimes refer to strong spiritual experiences as 'mountaintop' experiences. When we do so, we are referring to this phenomenon of the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of Elijah and Moses. It is indeed being 'lit' from within. And those are the kinds of experiences that strengthen our spiritual life and draw us closer to God. They are the kinds of visions and experiences that can change the trajectory of our life. They are also the ones we are hesitant to describe to others. We couldn't do an accurate job...and besides...who in the world would believe us? But they are the experiences that we never forget.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.