

The Real Jesus
February 7, 2016
Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah" – not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

One of the most useful tools for interpreting Scripture is similar to an old real estate saying. Just as one of most important things in real estate sales is location, location, location, one of the most important things for understanding Scripture is context, context, context.

Unfortunately, many of our Sunday readings are too short. They fail to give us the context of the message. For example, today's reading recalls the account of the Transfiguration, the time when Jesus gave three of his disciples a glimpse of his true nature. What that reading doesn't tell us is that the Transfiguration took place in a very interesting context.

Just a few days before the Transfiguration, Jesus spent time with the disciples giving them some important instructions on who he was. Luke tells us: *[Jesus] asked [the disciples], "Who do the crowds say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God"* (Lk 9:18-20 ESV).

Luke doesn't tell us that even though Peter had the right answer, he didn't fully understand what he had said. Matthew, on the other hand, wasn't quite so kind to Peter when he related the account. After Peter got the answer right, Matthew says: *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"* (Mt 16:21-23 ESV).

Instead of dealing with Peter's lack of understanding, Luke gives us Jesus' response to Peter's answer: *The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and*

chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Lk 9:22 ESV). Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, then Jesus explains what it means to be the Christ.

As we look at the Gospel accounts, it's easy to see that the disciples were confused. They knew Jesus was the Christ, but they were still laboring under the misunderstanding that the Christ of God would be an earthly liberator who would defeat the Romans.

They even hoped Jesus would restore the glory of Israel to what it was in the days of David and Solomon. The concept of the Christ who would suffer, die, and rise again was simply more than they could comprehend.

With this background, we can look at today's text. Jesus led three confused and bewildered disciples, Peter, James, and John, up to a mountaintop to pray. This is the first time we are told that while Jesus was praying Peter, James, and John fell asleep. (The other time was in Gethsemane.)

When they woke up, what the three saw blew them away. Not only was Jesus shining like the sun, he was having a conversation with Moses and Elijah. The topic of their discussion was very important. The text says: *[They] spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem* (Lk 9:31 ESV). This is Luke's gentle way of saying they were discussing Jesus' crucifixion. The disciples were confused about Jesus' death, but Moses and Elijah spoke openly about it.

The conversation the disciples listened in on was the topic of the mountaintop. I imagine it was the topic in heaven. That conversation was about what it means to be the Anointed One of God, the Christ, the Messiah.

All people react differently when they are confused or bewildered. Peter's usual response was to open his mouth (usually followed by putting his foot in it). This time Peter says: *Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah* (Lk 9:33 ESV). We don't know what Peter was actually thinking, but we know he still didn't understand because Luke goes on to say Peter didn't know what he was saying.

God the Father interrupts Peter with a heavenly announcement. A cloud envelops them and they hear the voice of the Father: *This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!* (Lk 9:35 ESV). It's almost as if the Father was saying, "Peter, I gave you two ears and one mouth. You should listen twice as much as you speak. This is my Son. You need to listen to him, especially when he says: *The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*" (Lk 9:22 ESV).

Peter wasn't the only one who had this problem. Everyone who heard Jesus preach and teach had a similar misunderstanding. They weren't looking for a Savior who would die for them. They wanted a Savior who lit up mountaintops. That Savior fit their plans; but not a Savior on his way to Jerusalem to die.

It's part of our fallen human nature to want a Savior who is spectacular. We like a show of glory that lights up the mountaintop. We like fireworks. We like light shows. We like fancy, showy things that grab our attention. Those things are fun. Those things are entertaining. That is the Savior our human nature wants.

However, there is a problem with that kind of Savior. We would be in big trouble if the only God we knew was the God who lit up the mountaintop. If that were the only God we knew, our relationship with him would be one of punishment.

The God the disciples saw on that mountain is that God who is holy and just. The God who must punish sin. We are terrible sinners. Therefore, if that is the only God we knew then we must be punished for our sins.

The Transfiguration is God's answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" He is indeed the Son of the living God. That means he is the Christ who must climb another mountain outside of Jerusalem and die to cover our sins. God must punish sin, but his punishment is not on us. Instead, Christ will take our sin upon himself and God's punishment for sin will rain down on him.

Christ stands in our place to satisfy the justice of our holy God. This is the Savior seen on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. God the Father identifies him as such and tells us to listen to him.

Jesus taught that he must suffer and die. He also taught that he would rise from the dead on the third day. Jesus kept both of those promises. He took on sin and the devil as he suffered on the cross. He took them on and he defeated them. Jesus took on death and defeated it, too, when he rose from the dead.

Jesus promises us that even though we die we will rise again. He will raise us to be with him. When the Last Day comes, those who reject Jesus will have to deal with the full glory of God's justice. There will be no escape - no second chances. They will find the Jesus, who lit up the mountain, a terrifying sight. Those who trust in the Savior, who went to the other mountain to die, will forever rejoice in the presence of God. They will live forever with the Savior who loves them.

The Transfiguration is like a conjunction in the middle of the Gospel account. It connects the seasons of Epiphany and Lent.

Epiphany is about shining a light on Jesus so we can come to know him. Epiphany begins with the light of a star leading the Wise Men to Jesus and it ends when we see the light of Jesus on the mountaintop. The Transfiguration is the epiphany that shows us our Savior in all his glory.

Lent is about Jesus' journey to the cross. Jesus went to the cross to pay the price of our sin. As we consider our sin, we must also consider our need to repent. Lent is a time of repentance; a time to meditate on how far our Savior went to show his love for us; a time to trust him for the forgiveness we so desperately need.

The Transfiguration prepares us for Lent. The Transfiguration fulfills its role as the true epiphany of Jesus. The Transfiguration identifies Jesus as the one who must make the journey to the cross to sacrifice himself for our salvation – the great theme of Lent. The Transfiguration also shows us that Jesus is truly the God of heaven on earth. The Transfiguration is the ultimate answer to the prayer, “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.”