

Exodus 34:29-35 Luke 9:28-36

March 2, 2025

Today marks the end of the season of Epiphany – the season of light – the season that begins with a star and ends with a transfiguration. The star leads the wise men to discover the baby Jesus, to discern that here, in this baby, something uncommon, “historic”, mysterious, is happening in the world. The transfiguration is a moment when the man Jesus is shrouded, bathed in a brilliance that visibly changes not only his countenance, but even his outer clothing – surely symbolizing the embodiment of an inner brilliance.



Exodus 34 tells us that Moses climbed Mt. Sinai a second time, remaining there for 40 days and 40 nights, deep in prayer and communion with God. When he returned to the people, with the 10 commandments, a second time, it is said that his face, his being, shone with such radiance that it not only frightened the people, it actually hurt their eyes to look at him.

I've often wondered if it was difficult for Moses to return to the people, a second time. The first time he had climbed Mt. Sinai, returning with the ten commandments, he had discovered that, in his absence, the people had created a golden calf and were worshipping it. Little wonder he hurled the sacred tablets of stone into the midst of them. He had been with Yahweh, the God who brought them out of their bondage and journeyed with them, protecting them, providing for them, shaping them. And they had forgotten this God and him, forgotten how God and he had endured their complaints and their doubts, and without wavering, had faithfully led them forward to the promise of a land rich and abundant. Now, almost on the doorstep of this land, the people had lost faith in Moses' leadership and had forsaken the God of their ancestors, the God of their rescue.

Forty days and forty nights – reminiscent of the trials after Jesus' baptism and of the season of Lent which begins this coming Wednesday, isn't it? Forty days and forty nights, Moses has been alone with God, in prayer and profound communion with God. The difference this time apart has made is visible on Moses' face. I wonder if he wanted to stay on the mountaintop?

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we see Jesus, accompanied by Peter, James and John, journey up a high mountain. There, these three chosen watch as Jesus prays. They are jolted into alertness as a mystery unfolds before their eyes. Jesus is bathed in a light so brilliant, so dazzling that they are nearly blinded. Suddenly, Jesus is joined by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and a cloud wraps around them all – much like the cloud that had provided protective covering for the Israelites as they fled from Egypt. Then, a voice breaks into the stunned silence, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.” We don't have to wonder if the three want to stay on the mountaintop. They immediately decide to build permanent structures, to keep this moment forever.

The structures are never built. Jesus leads the way down out of the mountain the next day, and they begin their final journey to Jerusalem – into the forty days and forty nights that end on the hill overlooking Jerusalem, in a garden called Gethsemane, on a hill called Calvary.

There is much meaning and import that we could “mine” from our stories this morning. I'll touch on three things, briefly.

First, I believe that a piece of living faithfully is to live expectantly – to expect God's

miracles in our lives and in the life of God's creation; to expect God's presence with us always, in every moment; to expect God's answer to our prayers ... Part of living expectantly is keeping watch, paying attention, and knowing the God to whom we pray so we'll recognize him when he reveals his glory.

God comes to us, abides with us in the Spirit. And God reveals God's self, sometimes on the mountaintops, in those moments in our lives when we are on top of the world. More likely, that revelation may happen in the midst of the most ordinary moments of our lives, through the most ordinary people we meet. If we aren't paying attention, we could easily miss out, overlook God's face. If we aren't expecting God to show God's self, we will be apt to use labels like "coincidence" or "lucky" or "fluke" and go on our way without a second thought.

Secondly, it is essential for us who follow Jesus to spend time in deep prayer and communion with God, as Moses did, as Jesus did. If we are to have the strength and the courage to follow his commandments, his teachings, his calling, we need to spend time with God, to be fed by communion with God, that we may be lit from inside by God's radiance and glory. This means that we need to draw apart, regularly, from every other distraction, to a mountaintop, if you will, to pray, to listen, to wait. A number of years ago, during Lent, I decided to begin and end each day with a time of quiet, and with this prayer, "Lord, I want to be open and available to you". Perhaps you'd consider something similar to this as well. For me, for the most part, it's become a daily practice, all year.

Thirdly, no matter how tempting it is to stay on the mountaintop, to bask in the warmth and glow of the light of that communion, we are meant to come down – to engage again with the world where God has planted us, with the people with whom God has blessed us, whom God has entrusted to us. It is intended that we will continue to live in the light of our transfiguring experiences, thereby becoming what Jesus calls us to become when he says, "you are the light of the world."

A man named John Ruskin lived in the time when English villages were lighted by gas lamps that had to be lit individually each evening. Once he was talking with a friend as the lamplighter moved slowly on a distant hill. Ruskin said, "There is what I mean by being a real Christian. A Christian's course can be traced by the lights that are left burning." May it ever be thus with us.