February 10, 2013

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Between last night and this morning, our whole world was transfigured and robed in dazzling white. This is especially fitting, since today's Gospel is Luke's version of the Transfiguration. The actual Feast of the Transfiguration is celebrated on August 6th, but in our tradition, we also read the transfiguration account on the last Sunday of Epiphany, or the last Sunday before Lent begins.

Since this is a tradition and not a doctrine, I think we can feel free to interpret why we read this passage at this time, depending on if we look at it as the end of Epiphany or a foreshadowing of Lent.

Let's take the end of Epiphany first. Luke's text tells us that Jesus was praying, which is a very common occurrence in Luke. And while he was praying the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Since Epiphany means to shine a bright light on to reveal it, and all of our imagery of Epiphany focuses on that light, this wonderful vision of Jesus transformed by light is completely in keeping with the season. What the disciples were seeing, revealed by light, was the true nature of Jesus, which had been partially hidden from them up to now. They were illuminated, or another way of putting it, enlightened, just as the Wise Men had been enlightened by seeing Jesus in the manger.

Now let's look at the transfiguration as a foreshadowing of Lent. Luke is the only Gospel account of the transfiguration that goes into detail about what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking about up there on the mountaintop.

In the early Church, Lent was, among other things, a time of preparation for Holy Baptism. New candidates were called catechumens – which is from the same root that we get our word catechism. They had spent up to several years being trained in the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Church, and spent the final Lent before their baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter in fasting, prayer, and study. In a very real sense, they were leaving their old lives behind and starting a new life in Christ, and that moment of transition happens when they are immersed in the waters of Baptism. Because of the imagery of going through the water from death to life, the story of the Exodus figures very prominently both in Baptism and at Easter.

So getting back to what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were talking about. It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, doesn't it? Moses, Elijah, and Jesus walked into a bar… But anyway, as I said, Luke's account is the only one that specifies their conversation. He says that they were talking about Jesus' departure, which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The Greek word for departure is *exodos*, the word from which we get exodus. It does mean departure, but it also means death. I find it interesting that they talk about Jesus accomplishing his death, rather than facing it or suffering it. Death for Jesus is one step on the way to accomplishing the real miracle – the resurrection.

All of these things – the reference to Exodus, the journey toward death and ultimately the resurrection, and even the cloud overshadowing them with darkness but moving towards light – are Lenten images and ideas, making this a fitting story to hear just before the start of Lent.

Whether you look at the transfiguration as a post-Epiphany or a pre-Lent story, or some combination of the two, there is one other concept to bear in mind. That's the transfiguration itself.

The word for transfiguration in Greek is *metamorphóow* – the origin of our word metamorphosis. It means exactly what it says, on one level, which is to transform or change. But in digging further into the word, there is a sense of something deeper than merely a change of clothing or look.

The main part of the word is *morphḗ,* which means the form or outward expression that embodies the essential inner substance, so that the form is in complete harmony with the inneressence. In his transfiguration, Jesus showed his disciples, for one brief and literally shining moment, his true nature – the nature of God. And if they didn't get it from seeing him change, they also heard a voice from heaven saying that this was God's son, his Chosen, and exhorting them to listen to him.

Focusing on the transfiguration at this time encourages us to do a couple of things, especially in Lent. First is to listen to God. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This involves slowing down and being quiet. It involves prayer and meditation, reading the Bible, and maybe even fasting as we are encouraged to do in Lent.

The second thing that thinking about the transfiguration encourages us to do is to be transfigured ourselves. We are encouraged to let our true self shine through so that our outer form is in complete harmony with our inner essence – our soul. To do this, we have to figure out just who that that true self is, which brings us back to the first thing – listening to God through prayer, meditation, study, and fasting.

I encourage you, and I include myself in this, to take on some form of Lenten discipline this year. Not as a form of self improvement – a holy diet, for instance – but as a way of clearing the channels to be able to listen to God. Whatever you decide to do, or not do, make it intentional and meaningful. The more we allow ourselves to be transfigured during Lent the more the joy of Easter will be deeper and even more transcendent.

I don't normally recite poetry in my sermons, but I ran across this sonnet by the English poet, Malcolm Guite, which I loved enough to break my no poetry rule. It's called "Transfiguration."

**Transfiguration – Malcolm Guite**

For that one moment, ‘in and out of time’,

On that one mountain where all moments meet,

The daily veil that covers the sublime

In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.

There were no angels full of eyes and wings

Just living glory full of truth and grace.

The Love that dances at the heart of things

Shone out upon us from a human face

And to that light the light in us leaped up,

We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,

A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope

Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.

Nor can this this blackened sky, this darkened scar

Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

Amen.