

FOCUS: The Good News is God's radiance shines through the darkness.

Today is the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. It is the final Sunday of Epiphany, and brings to a close the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle that starts the church year. It's a proper way for us to bring this season to a close, because we have come from the promise of the Light of the World to come on the first Sunday in Advent to the brilliant white light surrounding Jesus and the others as they gather on Mount Sinai. Yes, it is also the last Sunday before the start of Lent, but the Transfiguration is not as much a precursor of the Lenten season as it is the finish line, if you will, of the current season.

This is the third time in three years I have preached on the Transfiguration texts. I note this not to imply that I'm bored with them, for that is certainly not true. Rather, as an admission that, while I have read and studied the text in its Scriptural context, sought out the best of the commentaries and comments of others on this singular event in the life of Jesus, I found myself struggling once again with the text. It's no wonder that it appears on most every list of the "tough passages of the Bible."

One noted scholar argues that the story of the Transfiguration is a fictional creation of the early Christians, particularly those of Jewish descent.¹ He argues that the early Christians felt Jesus was at least as important as Moses, and so create this story of the Transfiguration as a way of showing the greatness of Jesus and making a clear link between Jesus and Moses. However, this diminishes the importance of this event. Other scholars and theologians suggest that the Transfiguration, legendary or not, plays a pivotal role in the life of Jesus. Still others write that the four different accounts—one each in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Second Peter—each have a different focus or purpose. Then, to make it more confusing, even the commentaries written on Matthew alone don't always agree on what the Transfiguration is supposed to convey. If the experts in the field of biblical studies are confused, it's no surprise to me that I'm even more bewildered. I'm in the dark.

In the dark. Just like Joshua as he accompanied Moses on Mount Sinai. Just like Peter, James, and John as they accompanied Jesus to the mountaintop. Just like tribes of Israel as they waited at the foot of the mountain for Moses and Joshua to return. Just like the...well, you get the picture. When we are unsure about something, we often say that we are "in the dark" about it. Sometimes, we are literally in the dark as well. That can be frightening, even in the best of circumstances.

When Moses and Joshua went to the top of the mountain, they waited there in a cloud. If you've ever been on a densely clouded mountaintop, especially when it was dark, you know how dark "dark" can be. I can't imagine how Moses really felt as he waited in the cloud-shrouded darkness of the mountaintop for six days, waiting to learn what the Lord had in store for him. But then, on the seventh day, Moses entered into the cloud itself, in which "the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire" resided, and he remained in that cloud of brightness for forty days.

In the presence of the Lord God, Moses was enlightened. In the presence of the Lord God, Moses received the Lord's commandments for the people. But God didn't call Moses to the mountaintop to simply give him a list of rules and requirements by which the people were expected to live. Rather, God called Moses to the mountaintop so that Israel itself—the

¹ David Friedrich Strauss, cited in *New Proclamation 2001-2002*, 138-139.

Chosen People—might live in God’s presence under the benefits of the covenant God had established. God’s radiance—God’s glory—shines through the darkness of the clouded mountaintop and through the darkness of the hearts of the people of God. God seeks to be in relationship with His people, so that they may dwell in the Light.

It is no accident, then, that Jesus appears on the mountaintop with Moses, and Elijah joins the two. Before the two others arrived, Jesus was *transformed*—that is, he was changed, or experienced a metamorphosis—as he reached the mountaintop. As he stood before the three disciples, his face blazing like the sun and clothing becoming a dazzling white, Jesus is joined by Moses and Elijah—representing the Law and the Prophets.

No Jew would have misunderstood the significance of this event, for Moses was the embodiment of the Law, handed to him by the Lord to be handed on to the people. And likewise, Elijah was the greatest prophet of the Lord God. Elijah was swept up into heaven by the Lord, and the people were promised that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah. Would it not be interesting to have a record of the conversation between these three? Perhaps we would have had one, had Peter been paying attention, rather than thinking about setting up tents or dwelling places for the three.

And then, a “bright cloud” appeared. Then, from the cloud, came a voice. It is the voice that came from the cloud when Jesus was baptized. And the voice cried out, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Just as the voice of the Lord called out to Moses and gave the commandments to him, so, too does the voice of the Lord call out and give commandments to Peter, James, and John—as well as all of us. We find Peter, James, and John in the dark, cowering on the ground in fear and anxiety.

They didn’t understand what was happening when they saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and they *certainly* didn’t understand what was happening when they heard the voice bellowing from the clouds. They had seen all that had transpired, but they were still in the dark.

Then Jesus touched them—and in Matthew’s gospel, “touching” is a healing act—and said to the “Get up and don’t be afraid.” Now was not a time for fear, Jesus was telling the three disciples. And the three stood up, and saw only Jesus standing on the mountaintop. There was no reason for Moses and Elijah to be there, for Jesus embodied the Law and the Prophets.

In the darkness of the mountaintop, God’s radiance shown through to Moses and Joshua. Likewise, in the darkness of the mountaintop, God radiance also shown through to Peter, James and John through the presence of the Messiah. God reached out and touched Moses when God handed Moses the tablets of the Law, and in the Law, the glory of God was made known to the people. On the mountain, Jesus reached out and touched the disciples, and the glory of God was first made known to them.

In the darkness of their fear, Moses and the disciples saw the radiance God. In the weeks and months ahead, as Jesus, accompanied by the disciples, traveled on toward Jerusalem, they traveled in the knowledge that Jesus was, indeed, the Light of the world—the Messiah.

Jesus' appearance in glory and light on the mountaintop foreshadow his appearance and return at the second advent. He commands the three disciples to keep silent about what they saw not because some things could only be understood after the resurrection, and thus could not be proclaimed until after the resurrection in the light of the Easter event. And so, dear friends, the Transfiguration is a proper way to end the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle, because in Advent we awaited the coming of the Light of the world, in Christmas, we celebrated the birth of the Light of the world, and in Epiphany, we experienced the manifestation of the Light of the world. In the darkness that surrounds us, God's radiance does indeed shine brightly.