

February 27, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

Lord, help us not only to hear your Word read and proclaimed today but listen to it that we may understand. May your Word challenge and change us on this Transfiguration Sunday. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 9, verses 28 through 43. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. **29** And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. **30** Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. **31** They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. **32** Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. **33** Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” — not knowing what he said. **34** While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. **35** Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” **36** When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. **37** On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. **38** Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. **39** Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he[j] shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. **40** I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” **41** Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” **42** While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. **43** And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Today is Transfiguration Sunday.

A day where we celebrate the glorious revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Christ’s manifestation as the fulfillment of the law and prophets.

Transfiguration Sunday closes the season of Epiphany - the season where we celebrate God’s manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ.

And it is the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday and thus the last Sunday before Lent.

Our book of common worship tells us that this Sunday, the Sunday immediately prior to Ash Wednesday is an appropriate time to celebrate the Transfiguration of the Lord, because this

event marked a transition in Jesus' ministry, in which he sets his face to go to Jerusalem, where he would die.

This day where we celebrate this transition in Jesus ministry, is, in fact, our own transition - a transition from celebrating God's manifestation in humanity here on Earth to a season of fasting, prayer, and preparation for Christ's death and resurrection.

Our scripture for today is Luke's account of the the transfiguration of the Lord.

Peter and James and John go up on a mountain to pray with Jesus and they almost fall asleep. Then all of a sudden Jesus' face changes and his clothes turn dazzling white and there appears Elijah and Moses. They start speaking with Jesus and then God declares, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!"

It is a story shrouded in mystery and wonder - but Luke's careful attention to detail in this account allow his readers to perhaps make sense of this mysterious story.

Peter, James, John, and Jesus go up on a mountain. A mountain is a traditional site in the Ancient Near East for encounters with God, a holy place to speak to the divine.

Think back to Moses and the Old Testament and how he would go up the mountain to speak with God and then come back down to the people to share what God had told him.

When they get up the mountain, they begin to pray.

Prayer is important in Luke's gospel. Jesus is often praying at key moments in his life - most notably when he is baptized, Jesus begins to pray the heavens open and a voices says "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Thus it makes sense that here, Jesus is praying when his face begins to change and his clothes turn a dazzling white - marking a key moment in his life and ministry.

As Jesus is transformed, Moses and Elijah appear in glory too.

Moses and Elijah were great Hebrew prophets. The prophet Moses reminds us of the past. He led the exodus from Egypt and into the 40 years in the wilderness.

The prophet Elijah is the prophet who will one day turn people's hearts back to the covenant . So, Elijah looks toward the future, the end of times.

And together when they speak with Christ - they speak of his departure to Jerusalem.

What's quite remarkable here is that in the original greek text, the word translated for us as departure is actually, in the greek, exodus. Moses and Elijah and Jesus speak together of Jesus's exodus to Jerusalem.

With Moses, the past, and Elijah, the future, speaking with Jesus transfigured in glory high on the mountain top about his own Exodus - we see that Christ is the fulfillment of the law and prophets.

And while God's glory was once revealed in the exodus out of Egypt where God saved the Israelites from slavery and death and delivered them to freedom, to the promise land, now God's glory is revealed in Jesus Christ and his exodus to Jerusalem, to the cross, to death. God's

saving and salvific power once shown in freedom is now shown in rejection, in suffering, in death.

All of that made known on a simple mountain top.

Mountain tops have always been holy places. They are a transition between heaven and earth - their foundation reaches deep in the earth and their peaks reach high past the clouds, to heaven. We climb them and we ourselves transition to this holy space on the long trek up, this space between heaven and earth.

God's glory is shown to us in those spaces between heaven and earth. They can be found on mountaintops yet, but in many other places do we feel a space between heaven and earth. We might call these spaces "thin places". The term comes from pagan celts and later Christians. "Heaven and Earth," the Celtic saying goes, "are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter."

In his article, Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer, Eric Weiner describes thin places as "locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the divine." Where "we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world."

Where are our thin places? Are they on mountain tops? Are they in sanctuaries? Are they on park benches? Where are we jolted out of old ways of seeing the world to see the world through Christ's glory?

I would guess some places come to mind - whether you intentionally found them by seeking prayer on a mountaintop, or stumbled into a thin space at a time you needed it the most. I think we all have places where it just feels holy. Where heaven and earth feel a bit closer.

But to have thin places, - it begs the question, why cannot every place be a thin place? Why does there seem to be an exclusion, as exclusiveness to places where heaven and earth beg to touch? As Weiner asks it in his article: "If God (however defined) is everywhere and "everywhen," as the Australian aboriginals put it so wonderfully, then why are some places thin and others not? Why isn't the whole world thin?"

It seems odd that the lectionary includes this healing story right with the story of the transfiguration - they seem like two separate things entirely. But, here they are, together - Jesus comes down from a mountain in glory to then see a boy suffering, and his disciples failing to help.

God's glory revealed in Christ in those thin places cannot be separation from a broken world, a world that needs healing.

As Lori Hale states bluntly - "The story of the transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if it does not include that moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain."

We cannot see God's glory manifest in places where the space between heaven and earth is thin, and then not live out that glory in our broken world. Live out Jesus' healing justice. We cannot leave it on the mountaintop .

This past week Russia began its invasion into Ukraine. Among the agony and heartbreak and grief of war and its violence and the lives lost already - I imagine that thin places, too, have

been destroyed in the attack. Places where the Ukrainian people saw the lines between heaven and earth blur and God's glory shine through. Places where they prayed for peace, prayed for hope.

When Christ transformed on that mountain, in that thin place - he not only shows his glory as God's son, the fulfillment of the law and prophets, the messiah - the transfigured Jesus also shows us a glimpse of what is possible for us, for humanity. The transfiguration shows us that we too can be transformed, again and again, to live out Christ's healing justice in the world. To bring it down from the mountain and into our everyday lives.

The disciples don't get it immediately - but perhaps there is grace that they, and us, who so often fail, still have an innate capacity to experience glory. And over time, over their lives, the disciples do live out Christ's healing justice and spread it around the world.

Weiner closes his article answering the question - why isn't every place a thin place? He says, "Maybe it is but we're too thick to recognize it. Maybe thin places offer glimpses not of heaven but of earth as it really is, unencumbered. Unmasked."

Maybe Christ's transfiguration truly shows us what we can be, if we live out Christ's glory. What God's kingdom here on earth really is.

Amongst the heartbreak, and the lives lost, and the thin places lost in Ukraine, God's transfiguration gives us hope for Christ's healing justice to be found, to be made manifest for the people who have had their lives violently disrupted and uprooted in an instant. Hope that Christ will come down from that mountain and heal.

Mr. Rogers has this famous quote - "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

We see people already helping. In big ways - people donating money, food, and medical supplies. At the Poland-Ukraine border crossing, World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit run by celebrity chef José Andrés, has already set up a station there to feed people making the long trek across the border.

And in small ways - like a mother taking a stranger's children to safety at the border.

In both, we see Christ's healing, Christ's glory come down from the mountain - out of the thin place.

As we leave behind epiphany and begin our Lenten journey in a world that is deeply broken - hold on to the glimpse of Christ's glory - a glory shown even when confronted with the cross. A glory that triumphs over death. Seek out the places where the distance between heaven and earth seems thin and be transformed to carry healing justice with you down the mountain and into our world that so desperately needs it.

And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.