

Transfiguration

Home Moravian Church - March 2, 2025

Craig Atwood

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

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.

Introduction

It is hard to believe that it is already March and spring is at hand. It has been a difficult winter for millions of people in the United States as we've faced a variety of weather emergencies that brought snow to New Orleans and firestorms to California. I know everyone is praying for a temperate and peaceful spring. Ash Wednesday is just three days away, and we will enter the period of the church year called Lent. Lent is traditionally a time for fasting and self-reflection as Christians contemplate the life, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is interesting that in the church calendar the Sunday before Lent focuses on the Transfiguration of Jesus. Before we enter the somber season of Lent, we have a glimpse of the glory of Jesus. Likewise, in the gospel of Luke, the story of the glorification of Christ looks ahead to the coming humiliation and suffering of Jesus on Good Friday.

Today is also the Sunday when we Moravians remember and celebrate the founding of our church 568 years ago. My sermon this morning may feel like two different sermons since I'll be talking about both Transfiguration and the founding of the Moravian Church, but these stories do come together in the end.

Transfiguration

First, let's look closer at our Gospel lesson, in which we heard the story of Jesus going to the top of a mountain with his disciples to pray. There are several times in the gospels when Jesus goes off to a quiet and isolated place to pray. Sometimes he takes along two or three disciples. He did this the night he was arrested. Peter, James, and John seem to be special disciples who bore witness to what happened when Jesus was praying. In our lesson for today, they have fallen asleep, and when they wake up they see Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah. Jesus was as bright as the lightning piercing the night sky. It is a very dramatic moment.

We use the word transfigured to describe Jesus' appearance changing from that of an ordinary human to a divine figure shining with a light that is almost too much to bear. If you are a fan of the Lord of the Rings, the wizard Gandalf is transfigured from Gandalf the Grey to Gandalf the White. When he first appears to companions, they cannot really see him because of the brilliance of the light. Tolkien was a devout Christian, and I'm sure he was thinking of the story of Jesus' transfiguration when he wrote that scene. There is one difference, thought. In Lord of the Rings Gandalf is transfigured through his death and rebirth. He fell into the abyss as Gandalf the Grey and was born again as Gandalf the White. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke this vision of Jesus in divine glory comes **before** the crucifixion and resurrection, not after. Luke is the only gospel that includes the detail that Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about his "exodus," which means his departure from this world. Everything about this story sounds like it should have come after the resurrection and before the ascension, but the gospels agree that the transfiguration happened before Jesus started on the long journey that led to cross.

I know you all love to hear about etymology and grammar, but I think it is interesting that we use the Latin word "transfigured" to describe what happened on the mountain. Trans is Latin for across or beyond. To translate is to bring meaning from one language to another language. To transcend is rise above or go beyond what is natural. Transfigure is to change in appearance. In English, it almost always means to

become more beautiful or divine. To be transfigured is to have your outward appearance change in a way that reveals who you really are. Jesus' true identity is revealed to the disciples for a short time.

But the gospel of Luke was written in Greek, not Latin. The original word that Luke uses is *metamorphothe*, which is the root our English word *metamorphosis*. That is the word we use for when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly or when an actor completely becomes a character. According to Luke, Jesus experienced a type of metamorphosis on the mountain, and three disciples got to see it. Peter, James, and John were the only ones to bear witness to Jesus' transformation from rabbi into a divine figure. He looked like an angel but was more than an angel. And their eyes could barely see. Their minds were blown by what they saw. Jesus revealed his true identity to three trusted friends, and they kept his secret until after his ascension. We only have this story because they later told other followers of Jesus what they had seen. I sometimes wonder if this moment of insight changed the way those three disciples acted in the rest of the gospel.

Moses and Elijah

They had fallen asleep and as they were waking up, they saw their master talking to Moses and Elijah. Since Luke tells this story from the point of view of the disciples, we can't be sure if this was a vision or a change in the real world. Were they somehow seeing into the spiritual realm, looking through a portal to heaven, or were Moses and Elijah physically there? We don't know for sure since all we have is the disciple's perception and their retelling of their experience. That is the nature of religious experience. Two people could be standing side by side and yet see different things. Jesus wasn't transported to heaven; heaven came down to him.

None of the gospel writers tell us how the three disciples knew who Jesus was talking to. They did not have name tags on that said "Hello, I'm Moses." Moses and Elijah were from the distant past. Since the Jewish tradition forbids people from making pictures of the prophets, there was no tradition of depicting Moses and Elijah. But, somehow, the three disciples knew who they were, the same way you know who people are in a dream. Even when people in a dream don't look the same as they do in real life you know who they are.

Moses and Elijah, the two greatest figures of the Old Testament had died centuries before and were in heaven in the more immediate presence of God. They had already

served God on earth and come into their glory in eternity. Moses was the lawgiver who saved the Israelites from slavery. Elijah was the prophet who had called the rulers of Israel to obey the laws of God. As we heard in the other lessons, Moses spoke with God on Mt Sinai when he received the law tablets. Afterward he had to veil his face because it reflected the glory of God and frightened the people. Elijah also spoke with God on Mt Horeb. Later he was taken up into heaven without dying on earth. Luke tells us that Jesus was also on a mountain top. In a few weeks, he will climb another mountain while carrying a cross. Jesus is going to be greater than Moses and Elijah. He will be the Savior of the whole world. The ancestors of Israel approved of Jesus's ministry and mission. Their presence on the mountain showed the disciples that Jesus was fulfilling the Law and Prophets.

Follow him

And then the vision was gone. Moses and Elijah were gone, and Jesus resumed normal identity. The disciples struggled to make sense of what they had seen. Peter wanted to stay there and build tents in the wilderness. He wanted to keep the experience going, to dwell in the miracle, but that was not what Jesus wanted. He still had work to do. Then they hear God speaking to them out of the cloud. They hear God telling them the same thing God had told John the Baptist when Jesus came to him for baptism. "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

Listen to him. In the New Testament the word listen means obey. God told the disciples to do what Jesus told him to do. The beautiful religious experience is over. Now is the time to listen to the Chosen One. Now is the time to see him fulfill the law and the prophets. Go down the mountain with Jesus. Go into the world with Jesus. Go through the trials and tribulations to come. Follow him. Stay with him to the end. And listen to what he says.

Unity of the Brethren

This brings us to the anniversary of the founding of our church by Gregory the Patriarch in 1457. Gregory and his companions were not planning to create a new church. They were just a group of men and women who had voluntarily come together in a community to live as Jesus taught his followers to live. They called themselves the Brothers' Union, or as it is translated more commonly in English - the Unity of the Brethren. The Brethren didn't call themselves a church because that word meant the official, state church – the Catholic Church, the Bohemian Church, or

one of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. These churches had big cathedrals, ornate altars, priests in beautiful vestments, and other things that money could buy. The institutional church had political power. Everyone in Europe, except for Jews, was forced by the government to be baptized and follow the laws of the state church. Bishops were government officials, and heresy was a crime that could be punished by the state.

Gregory was not a professor like John Hus. He was not even a priest; he was a tailor. But he believed that Christianity was more than baptism and paying tithes. He believed that Christians should follow the teachings of Christ as they are found in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel that Ginny preached on two weeks ago and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the meek, the peacemakers, and those who thirst for justice.

Gregory and a small group of companions turned their backs on the state church with its glorious cathedrals, its artwork, its rituals, its Inquisition, its crusaders, and its systemic injustice. They did not need golden chalices and marble altars. They did not need robes and incense and statues to worship God. All they needed was the New Testament and the sincere desire to be a disciple of Jesus in the world. They believed that true Christianity was not defined displays of wealth and power. True Christianity is defined by faith in Christ, love for Christ, and obedience to Christ.

In a village called Kunvald the brothers and sister made a covenant to help one another renounce worldliness and selfishness. They risked everything, even their lives, to follow Jesus. They didn't rise up with weapons to attack the church or the state; they simply refused to comply with laws they believed were contrary to the law of Christ. They renounced violence, warfare, and swearing oaths. They renounced coercion in matters of faith. They renounced crusades, inquisitions, the idea of Christian nationalism. They resolved to love one another, to love their neighbors, and even to love their enemies.

Conclusion

It may seem like the story of the Gregory and the Brethren has nothing to do with the mysterious story of Jesus' transfiguration, but they do connect. Our gospel lesson ends with Jesus resuming his humble, everyday form, and walking down the mountain with the three disciples. God told the disciples to listen to Jesus and do what he taught them to do. Jesus did not let them to build shrines to his glory. He wanted

them to walk alongside of him and listen to his teachings. These disciples walked with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem where he was arrested, tried, and executed. And when he was resurrected he returned to them to teach them more. In Kunvald, Gregory and the Brethren risked their lives to follow in the footsteps of the disciples. They also sought to listen to Jesus, to walk with Jesus, and to obey Jesus. The glimpse of Jesus' glory we get on Transfiguration Sunday can inspire us on to continue on our journey of faith. It is the journey with Jesus that is important. May the courage of Gregory inspire us to remain true to our convictions in difficult times.

Let me draw your attention back to the words of the Apostle Paul that Ginny read earlier in the service: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God."

"Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." May we continue to follow the way of Christ in all that we do.