

## The Transfiguration

<sup>28</sup> About eight days after he said this, he took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup> And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup> who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. <sup>33</sup> As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying. <sup>34</sup> While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." <sup>36</sup> After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36)

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## Context

The Transfiguration event is also described in Mt 17:1-9 and Mk 9:2-10 – readings that are traditionally proclaimed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent in their own respective liturgical years as well as on the Feast of the Transfiguration each August 6<sup>th</sup>. The Lenten use of the reading, following the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert by the devil, breaks up the flow of Luke narrative. Perhaps a summary of what has transpired since Luke 5 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time) can fill in the gap:

Luke 4:14-9:50 is generally described as the Galilean Ministry with large sections further labelled:

- Preaching in Nazareth (4:16-30; 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays)
- Teaching and healing in Capernaum
- Calling and Forming the Disciples (5:1-6:16; 5:1-11 is the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday. This longer section includes cleansing a leper, healing the paralyzed, debates with scribes and Pharisees, calling of Levi)
- Sermon on the Plain (6:17-49; Lucan version of the Sermon on the Mount appears in the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Sundays)
- Miracles and healing – One greater than the prophets (7:1-50; appears in the 9<sup>th</sup> thru 11<sup>th</sup> Sundays)
- Parable of the Sower and the Seed / Gerasene demoniac / Jairus' daughter (8:1-46)

Prior to our gospel narrative, in Luke 9 we encounter

- Jesus' commission of the Twelve for mission (vv.1-6)
- Herod's questions about Jesus (vv.7-9)
- The feeding of the 5,000 (vv.10-17)
- Peter's Confession of Jesus as the Messiah (vv.18-21)
- Jesus' first prediction of his passion, death, and resurrection (vv.22-27)
- The Transfiguration (vv.28-36)

Luke 9:50 is considered the end of the Galilean ministry. In v.51 Jesus turns towards Jerusalem.

One lens with which to view Chapter 9 is the quest to identify Jesus. The chapter begins with Jesus giving the twelve power and authority over all demons and diseases and sending them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal. They go about curing diseases everywhere. Their experience of that power and authority should give them insight into Jesus' identity. In contrast to their power and success, Herod is perplexed about Jesus and wants to see him.

When the twelve return from mission they arrive at a scene where a multitude has gathered around Jesus. As Stofferger writes: “It is getting late. The disciples tell Jesus to send the crowd away so that they might find food and lodging. Jesus tells these men, ‘You give them something to eat.’ The twelve wonder, ‘Who us? How can we feed all these people?’ Their mighty bubble is burst. They have just come back from their glorious missionary journey. They had been performing miracles right and left. They had been preaching God's message. All the glory of the past is wiped out with one question, ‘You give them something to eat’ (vv. 12-17). They have gone from being powerful to being powerless.”

The crowd is like Herod – not quite sure about Jesus. But Peter steps forward and answers the identity question: “*The Messiah of God.*” (v.2). It is then that Jesus predicts his passion, death and resurrection, showing what it means to be Messiah in this world – whereupon Jesus shows the disciples what it means to be the Son of God in his glory: the Transfiguration.

The location of the mountain is not given anywhere in the Gospels. Some have thought that it was a part of Mt. Hermon, near Caesarea Philippi, since the transfiguration occurs shortly after Peter’s confession there in Mark. On the other hand, since the time of Origen, the mountain has been identified as Mt. Tabor, near Nazareth, but the significance of the location may actually lie more in its parallel with the experience of Moses and Elijah on Mt. Sinai and Mt. Horeb.

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## Commentary

The transfiguration scene is composed of the following elements: (1) Jesus’ withdrawal to the mountain to pray with the three disciples (v. 28), (2) the transfiguration (v. 29), (3) the appearance of Moses and Elijah (vv. 30–33a), (4) Peter’s response (v. 33b), (5) the voice from the cloud (vv. 34–35), and (6) the disciples’ response.

***Praying on the Mountain.***<sup>28</sup> *About eight days after he said this, he took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray.*

Characteristically Luke tells us that Jesus went to the mountain to pray. This is a key motif in the Lucan narrative. In the gospel and in Acts, Luke continually points to people achieving the proper attitude and posture before God through the discipline of prayer which Luke repeatedly highlights. He has two principal ways of doing this: (a) He records prayers of Jesus (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28f.; 10:21f.; 11:1; 22:41ff.; 23:46; they show Jesus at prayer before each great crisis of his life). This Gospel alone records that Jesus prayed for Peter (22:31f). Luke tells us that Jesus prayed for his enemies (23:34) and for himself (22:41f.). (b) He includes parables which teach so much about prayer, the friend at midnight (11:5ff.), the unjust judge (18:1ff.), the Pharisee and the tax-collector (18:10ff.). In addition Luke records some exhortations to the disciples to pray (6:28; 11:2; 22:40, 46), and he has a warning against the wrong kind of prayer (20:47).

Luke connects the transfiguration more closely with what has gone before it than the other accounts. Literally, v. 28 reads: “It happened after these words (*logoi*), about eight days, ...” The phrase “these words” points to v.26 – “*Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*” Within this scene, only Luke includes the word “glory” (*doxa*) in his account of the transfiguration (vv. 31, 32).

This is a key moment in the gospel. The disciples, the crowds, and even the twelve have been asking about Jesus' deeper identity. In the moment before the revelation of his glory (*doxa*), Jesus takes an inner circle of apostles to the mountain to pray in order that they be well disposed to understand that which will be revealed. This is a feature not present in the other accounts. In this way, Luke underscores the power of prayer to mediate the presence of God.

**The Transfiguration.** <sup>29</sup> *While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.*

Both Matthew and Mark starkly report: “*And he was transfigured (metamorphōthē) before them.*” The underlying Greek word means to “transform, change completely.” Luke uses the more mundane *heteron* (change) and limits the description to *his face*. All the accounts agree that the clothing became a brilliant white; Luke using the word that sometimes describes the white flash of lightning.

What are to make of the Transfiguration? It is a familiar pericope of all three synoptic gospels that is perhaps too familiar and thus we are tempted to accept it and not stop and consider the significance of it. A limited number of modern scholars describe the narrative as a misplaced story of Jesus’ resurrection, his second coming, his heavenly enthronement, and/or his ascension. In other words, the gospel writers inserted/retrojected a story here for their own narrative purposes. Under such an assumption lays the scholar’s own misgivings about miraculous and extraordinary events. But should we really have been surprised by the events of the Transfiguration?

The transfiguration of Jesus is an amazing event but not totally unexpected for Luke’s readers. After all, Jesus had a miraculous birth, and his ministry began with the divine endorsement of his heavenly Father (3:22). Jesus had done extraordinary works of compassion and had taught the Law with an authority not inherited by any earthly authority. He had demonstrated supernatural control of natural processes by calming storms and feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread. Thus, Jesus’ transfiguration seems consistent with all that has been revealed so far in the gospel. Among the many things Luke has narrated, we know this: Jesus is the Son of God, the fulfillment of Old Testament patterns and predictions, and he has promised a future Kingdom.

Consider the following:

- The transfiguration story recalls the baptism of Jesus and the voice from heaven designates him both the powerful Son of God and the weak suffering Servant (cf. 3:22). This commission is reconfirmed as Jesus begins to instruct his disciples on the meaning and cost of discipleship (9:23-27). Thus it is important that the scene follows the first passion prediction (9:22).
- The transfiguration story recalls and confirms Peter’s confession (9:19-21). Although Peter was divinely inspired to confess, he still did not seem to grasp the full significance of that revelation. The transfiguration is its own witness to the fullness of the revelation.
- The transfiguration story connects the confession of Jesus as Son of God and Jesus’ self-identification as Son of Man who suffers, is killed, and is vindicated by God, and will appear as judge at the parousia
- The transfiguration should not be viewed as the illumination of the man Jesus with an extrinsic glory but as the momentary uncovering of the Son of God’s own intrinsic glory, which has been temporarily veiled and will be reassumed at the resurrection and ascension (John 17:4–5, 24; Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:16–19; Heb 1:1–4). In this the transfiguration story anticipates the eschatological events of the Resurrection.
- The transfiguration authenticates both Jesus’ divine identity and God’s plan to occupy this world and rule it forever. By the transfiguration, the disciples were given a glimpse of not only who Jesus is but also what he will one day bring to this world (see 2 Pet 1:16–18). Moses and Elijah are worthy figures, but they are only supporting actors in the redemptive drama the disciples witness. As the scene ends, Moses and Elijah have exited, and only Jesus remains in the center of the stage. The “*listen to him*” of the transfiguration will become the great commission of the church to proclaim the good news.

And thus the transfiguration has significance for us. It gives us a glimpse into our destiny. Transformation begins already in this life. Seeing the glory of the Lord in the Spirit, the disciples are

reminded that they were created in the image of him whose glory they see (2 Cor. 3:18). This is not mystical deification but a recovery/re-recognition of the divine likeness. It takes place in the ministry of the Spirit. It is not for an elite few but for all Christians. It is not just a hope for the future (cf. 1 Cor. 15:44ff.) but begins already with the Resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. It carries with it an imperative: “*listen to him.*” A significance of the transfiguration is that we obtain a glimpse of what we are and are becoming. As St Irenaeus famously said centuries ago: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

As well “*listen to him*” points to the teaching just prior to the transfiguration, providing key content of what we are to listen to: Peter's confession (vv. 18-20), Jesus' prediction of the passion (vv. 21-22), and the demands of discipleship (vv. 23-27). Could it also be that the saying: “There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God” (v. 27) was fulfilled when some of them saw Jesus in all of his glory on the mountain?

**Moses and Elijah.** <sup>30</sup> *And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup> who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.*

The presence of Elijah and Moses has been much discussed by various scholars. (1) Do they represent the different kinds of life endings (burial versus being taken up to God)? (2) Is their presence an indication of endorsement by great prophets and wonderworkers of old? (3) Is Jesus the fulfillment of the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) – and so *listen to him*? (4) Or is it that Moses points to the expected great-prophet-like Moses, while Elijah suggests the eschaton's (end days) arrival – roles fulfilled in Jesus.

One should be aware, that although Luke is not writing for a Jewish audience as is Matthew, Luke makes the Moses connection explicit in various texts (Acts 3:18-22; 7:35-37), while Elijah is consistently a figure of eschatological hope (Lk 1:16-17, when John the Baptist is pictured as such a figure). When Luke does associate Elijah with Jesus, it is to cast Jesus as one who, like Elijah, engages in a prophetic ministry in which the power of God is active on behalf of those not normally regarded as the elect—that is, Gentiles, Samaritans, and the poor. Moses is also portrayed along dual lines—first in his identification with the law of God (e.g., 2:22), but more pervasively as the great prophet of God.

The two may also have christological significance in that Jesus has demonstrated his mastery over the sea and fed the multitude in the wilderness (fulfilling the pattern of Moses at the exodus) and has multiplied loaves, cleansed lepers, and raised the dead (fulfilling the prophetic works of Elijah and Elisha). It should be noted that Moses and Elijah also appear “*in glory*” seemingly indicating that they share a status of those who belong to the heavenly court – and, unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke gives us some indication of the topic of conversation: “*his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.*”

Luke seems to draw specific reference to the Exodus story (esp. Exodus 24–34)—for example, the presence of companions, the setting on a mountain, the explicit mention of Moses, Jesus' change of countenance, reference to tents (or tabernacles), the cloud, the motif of fear, the clear allusion to Dt 18:15 (“Listen to him”). I would suggest that the intent is to frame Jesus' story as also an epic story of freedom from bondage; this time a new Exodus. Recall Jesus' “mission statement”: <sup>18</sup> “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup> and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*” *The event suggests two great periods of Israel's history, the exodus and the end-time hope of deliverance.* (Luke 4:18-19). “Consequently, the transfiguration scene calls upon this choir of voices especially to stress the image of Jesus as liberator from bondage, his ministry as one of release from captivity in all its guises. How is this release accomplished? Clearly, release has already been available in Jesus' itinerant ministry in Galilee and in the extension of that

ministry in the missionary activity of the twelve. Luke's account of the transfiguration does nothing to discount the effectiveness of Jesus' powerful ministry of liberation heretofore, but does go on to intimate the redemptive power of his upcoming journey through death to exaltation." [Green, 379]

**Peter's Response**<sup>32</sup> *Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.*<sup>33</sup> *As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying.*

As before, Peter again responds, again without a full understanding. Consider Peter's proposal to make three tents (*skēnē*; also "booth" or "tabernacle"). What did he intend? It has been variously understood as traveler's hut, the "tent of meeting" where God spoke with Moses outside the camp (Exod 33:7), a more formal tent used in the Festival of Booths (cf. Lev 23:42–43; Zech 14:16ff), and even as the Jerusalem Temple tabernacle. It is this last image that Luke may have in mind as background – notwithstanding Peter's intention. It is the Temple tabernacle where the *Shekinah*, the fiery cloud that symbolized the continuing presence of God among the people, dwelt over the ark of the covenant. The response to Peter's proposal is three-fold (Boring, 364)

1. The heavenly cloud of God's presence appears, as on the tabernacle of Moses' day and the later Temple. As of old, the heavenly voice comes from the cloud, and the God who had previously spoken on Mount Sinai only to Moses speaks directly to them. The heavenly voice speaks in exactly the same words as at the baptism (see 3:17), confirming the identity and mission of Jesus declared there, and confirming the confession Peter himself had made in the preceding scene (16:16).
2. Although three transcendent figures are present, the heavenly voice charges the disciples to hear Jesus. As in the *Shema* (Deut 6:4), "hear" carries its OT connotation of "obey" and is the same command given with regard to the "prophet like Moses" whom God would send (Deut 18:15; cf. 13:57). The disciples are fearful in response to the theophany, as in Exod 34:30; Dan 10:9; and Hab 3:2 LXX.
3. Jesus comes to them and they see no one but "*Jesu... alone.*" To focus all attention on Jesus and to distinguish him from Moses and Elijah, who have now disappeared, Luke has subtly rewritten Mark so that the word *alone* might stand here as the emphatic closing word of the scene. The heavenly visitors depart, but Jesus stays—Jesus alone. Without heavenly companions, without heavenly glory, *he* is the "tabernacle" (*skene*), the reality of God's abiding presence with us (cf. 1:23; 28:20). The disciples descend from the mountain into the mundane world of suffering and mission, accompanied by Jesus, God with us.

Peter has only partially grasped the significance of the event. He wants to freeze the moment and commemorate the place, but faithfulness will require following Jesus to the cross, not commemorating the place of the transfiguration, which—fittingly—is not named in any of the Gospels.

**Voice from the Cloud.**<sup>34</sup> *While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud.*<sup>35</sup> *Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him."*<sup>36</sup> *After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.*

Clouds also serve in Luke and Acts as in other biblical accounts to manifest and conceal the presence of God (Exod 16:10; 19:9; 24:15–18; 33:9–11). Daniel foresees that the Son of Man will come to the Ancient of Days with the clouds of heaven (Dan 7:13). So, too, Jesus would be taken up in a cloud (Acts 1:9) and return on the clouds (Luke 21:27; cf. 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7; 14:14).

Culpepper [206] writes: "As at Mt. Sinai, a cloud overshadowed them, and God spoke from the cloud (Exod 19:16–20). The voice from the cloud speaks the climactic affirmation of Jesus' identity in this

section of the Gospel: 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' The pronouncement echoes two verses from the OT. Psalm 2:7, 'You are my son;/ today I have begotten you,' was also echoed at the baptism of Jesus (3:22). Isaiah 42:1, which is one of the servant songs, reads, 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold;/ my chosen, in whom my soul delights;/ I have put my spirit upon him;/ he will bring forth justice to the nations.' Earlier, at the baptism of Jesus, the voice from heaven had spoken to Jesus alone: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (3:22). Now, the divine voice pronounces the fullest answer to the question of Jesus' identity to this point in the Gospel. Jesus is both the unique son and the chosen Servant in whom God delighted and through whom God would bring salvation to the nations."

### ***A Reflection***

Annemarie Reiner (of Adelaide, Australia) posted this reflection on the Transfiguration on her blog "Who Do You Say That I Am." It is a very nice reflection for this Lenten Season.

When we look at our Gospel today we can understand why daily reflection is so important. These three disciples (and the rest of them) didn't get who Jesus was until well after his death. They didn't understand what had happened at the transfiguration. They didn't understand what was happening as they witnessed Jesus' life. They didn't understand what was happening at the crucifixion. But they kept pondering their experiences over and over - if they didn't we simply wouldn't have the New Testament.

So what do we learn from this?

Every human life is filled with experiences from when we get up until we go to sleep and even in our sleep we experience our dreams. What do we do with these experiences?

Mostly we ignore them and then we forget them. Even the profound moments that come into our lives, we can shut the depth of their meaning out. We might have gone through a depression – do we take the time to ponder the meaning of this depression in my life or do I just think: thank God that is over and then fill our lives with all sorts of other distractions and then wonder why down the track I fall into another bout of depression?

I might have experienced walking with a loved one who has been sick and has died. Do I sit back and reflect upon the experience or is it too difficult to re-enter this painful period, so we try and shut it out hoping it will go away.

I might have experienced a deep hurt. Do I ponder the experience considering my own reactions and responses to the hurt or do I totally throw blame on those who hurt me without any self-reflection? So I become the victim in life and I go from one lot of blaming to the next without any examination of my own heart.

I might have deeply hurt someone myself. Do I take the time reflect upon my behavior (even if it is down the track from the experience) so as to be confronted with what I have done. Or do I just keep running away from this self-disclosure because it's too painful?

There are numerous life experiences that we all have. Many of these experiences are profoundly mysterious. Sadly many of them become buried and we lose the richness these experiences can offer us. Not only this but we now have multi-million dollar industries offering all sorts of therapies etc. to help people cope with the results of their non-reflective lives.

Someone once said that a no-reflective life is a life not worth living. It might be more accurate to say that a non-reflective life is a life not lived – it is life rejected.

Jesus invites each of us to this holy mountain today. It might be shrouded in mystery – we may not have much of an idea who Jesus is yet – we may be confused by the experiences of life and feel lost – but Jesus says to us today to come with him. To trust him. To have faith in him. To keep thinking about our experiences but to do this with Jesus at our sides.

When we have the courage to come to the mountain with Jesus then we too may see something beyond our imagining. When we truly see Jesus transfigured (see Jesus as he truly is) then the life that Jesus offers us will begin.

A large part of the problem is that we really don't see who Jesus is. Jesus can become our own creation – a feel safe, feel good guy that we call upon when it suits us, and we try and mould Jesus to be what we want him to be. If we truly believed in Jesus we too would not know what to say, we would be frightened, but we would hear God saying to us: Listen to him. And even in all our blindness and ignorance all we would truly want would be to Listen to Jesus – we would hunger for Jesus – not the Jesus of our own making, but the Jesus who stands before us as mystery. Can we accept such a mystery?

We, the Body of Christ must also be transformed just as Jesus was transformed – but this cannot happen until we come to this mountain in all humility. Then the horrors our world is currently experiencing may begin to fade and the light will truly shine in the darkness.

In the coming week let us pray for the desire and will to come to the mountain that Jesus invites us too so that we may encounter the true mystery before us and then ponder for a life time its meaning for ourselves and the whole of creation.

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