

## The Transfiguration

Exodus 34:29-35

II Peter 1:13-21

Luke 9:28-36

### **Framed In Humility**

From a sermon by Brother Abraham of St. Gregory's Abbey, Michigan, on August 6, 2025.

Some scholars think that maybe the story of the transfiguration is out of place in the gospels and that it might be an event that happened after the resurrection, but was misplaced in the text. However, after reading the events surrounding the story, the glorification of Jesus taking place in the midst of some not-so-glorious events becomes not an academic problem, but rather a source of joy. Luke gives a good overview of what took place in the weeks before the transfiguration. The disciples are sent out to preach and heal. The crowd surrounding Jesus grows, and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand happens. Herod becomes interested in Jesus and makes speculations about his nature, as do many other people. In the midst of this, Jesus starts telling his disciples that he will be killed and raised from the dead, and that if they want to keep following him, they too must be ready to meet with difficulty along the way. After saying that, Peter, James, and John go up with Jesus to pray on a mountain, and there they witness Jesus undergo a strange transformation as he meets with Moses and Elijah. Luke seems to suggest that his appearance did not change that much, other than shining. His face did not even continue to shine after coming down from the mountain, so it was not even as dramatic as what happened to Moses, as we heard in our first reading. After the strange events on the mountain, they come back down, they tell no one what happened, and events proceed much as they did before: Jesus heals, the disciples argue, and Jesus talks more about the necessity of being prepared for difficulty if people want to follow him.

It seems as if Luke is trying to affirm the glory of Jesus, while at the same time placing it in a frame of humility. Jesus shines on the mountain, but before and after, he was just Jesus. One of the events that Luke says happened before the transfiguration involved Jesus asking his disciples what people thought about him. They answer that maybe he is John the Baptist or another prophet come back to life. When Jesus asks what they thought about him, Peter answers "The Messiah, The Christ". It is only after that answer that Jesus takes three of them up the mountain. It seems as if Jesus wanted them to come to terms with who he was before they witnessed his glory on the mountain, so that the transfiguration was a response to, not a cause of, their faith.

Peter's confession of Jesus as messiah came after traveling with him for a while. During those travels, the disciples had plenty of time to see Jesus in his full humanity: eating, drinking, sweating, sleeping, using the latrine, and everything else we all do. But it was in the context of this ordinariness and humility that Jesus found opportunities to perform miracles, and it was the extraordinary, glamorous events that he avoided. As they traveled, they heard Jesus preach and teach, but again his subject matter always involved things in everyday life, rather than theological treatises. They also heard him talk a lot about the difficulty and pain that lay ahead of all of them. He seems to be saying that everyday things and human despair are important enough to be of concern to God, and he wanted to make that point clear before he let them in on the transfiguration. The crowds wanted to witness heavenly signs, and they missed out on his heavenly appearance; the apostles witnessed earthly signs, and they saw heaven on earth.

That's the part of the story that can be so joyful, because like the apostles, we don't receive many signs from heaven, but through our normal, nonglamorous, often difficult surroundings, we can see heaven on earth - if we are willing to make them the arena for the miraculous. The miracles may not always come when we think they should, and heaven might be difficult to see all the time, but unless we are at least open to the existence of heaven in our ordinary lives, we will never see it, because glory comes along with, rather than instead of, humility. Even the conversation on the mountain between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was about the upcoming arrest and execution of Jesus, and afterwards, Jesus does not tell the crowd that they will get a taste of the transfiguration by following him. Instead, he talks about more difficulty.

Peter, in his letter of which we heard a part of today, also wants to make sure that such unusually glorious events serve only to confirm, not act as the basis of, his reader's faith. In the verses that come before the ones we read today, he gives a list of things involved in Christian life, and they are all quite plain: goodness, self control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. But no matter how plain and ordinary those things are, he makes it clear that it is by these means that we grow in faith and knowledge of Jesus, becoming "participants in the divine nature" through his "precious and very great promises." Peter does not outright say, but other reliable sources do, that the reason we can participate in the divine nature is because divinity has participated in our nature. We can see heaven on earth because in Jesus, heaven is on earth and earth is in heaven, and since we are the body of Christ, we can be transfigured just as Jesus was. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "He did not come to put us to shame with his divinity. He came to call us unto the fullness of our humanity, which was good enough for him."

It is up to us to open our eyes to see all this heaven on earth - all this divinity flowing through the humble aspects of our humanity - because like the three apostles on the mountain, sometimes our eyes are shut because of our drowsiness. So we must always be mindful and live with intention. It is also up to us to not pretend that heaven is in places where it is not - we are surrounded by people going through hell, and it is our duty to do what we can in our own way to help those people out of their pit. So, as we go through our daily tasks, may we see the miracles occurring around us, and may we do what we can to make those miracles happen. May we always be aware of the heaven in our midst. May we show it to others, accept it from others, and bring it to those who need it most. AMEN