

Watch Out for That Cloud!

Today's gospel reading is a lesson in keeping things in perspective, and the danger in taking things out of perspective.

Our Gospel today is one that is fairly well known. The Transfiguration of Jesus. It is not the first time a person from the Bible has been transfigured. Who was the first one? Moses. We'll get back to that in a bit.

We had been following fairly chronologically through the gospel of Luke, yet for today's reading we've moved ahead somewhat to Chapter 9. We begin part way through the Chapter and it begins with these curious words – "Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James..." (Luke 9.28, NRSV).

An innocent enough statement, eight days after these sayings...yet I have one question...WHAT SAYINGS? From the beginning of Chapter Nine we read of the Mission of the Twelve (9.1-6), then Herod's Perplexity (9.7-9), then the Feeding of the Five Thousand (9.10-17), Peter's Declaration about Jesus (9.18-20), then the one where Peter realises Jesus is the Messiah, finally Jesus foretells his Death and Resurrection (9.21-27).

That's a lot to speak of in a short amount of time. The apostles' heads must have been swimming with all they had heard. And so, eight days later they go up on the mountain with Jesus to pray. They have no idea what is before them, and they are in for quite a show.

Before we get to that, let's go back a few thousand years, and hear the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments. It appears three times in the Hebrew Scriptures, twice in the book of Exodus and once in the book of Deuteronomy. The story of the Ten Commandments is a long story in Exodus, and in fact, the tablets are given twice. The first time, Moses is gone 40 days and 40 nights. The faithful get tired of waiting for him, and Aaron panics, gathers all the gold and makes a golden calf. God sees this, tells Moses to get back down there, or all shall be smote.

Moses pleads for leniency, goes down the mountain, sees the revelry, smashes the tablets and gives them all a good telling off.

After a good night's sleep and a few sacrificial killings, Moses goes back up Mt. Sinai, and sees God, and after being placed safely in the crag of the rock, God passes by Moses who sees God's glory but not God's face. Unbeknownst to Moses, he has been transfigured by God's glory and his face shone because he had been talking with God. Etc.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him as he goes up on the mountain. Which mountain? Likely Mount Tabor. And as Jesus was praying, his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. THEN two men arrive, who we learn are Moses and Elijah. The three dudes are chatting about Jesus' upcoming departure, which we are told was to happen shortly in Jerusalem.

Now just imagine the sight that Peter, James and John have witnessed. It has been a long day. Walking up a mountain is not an easy task accomplished in a few minutes. We are told that they are "weighed down with sleep" (Luke 9.32, NRSV). They are awake enough to witness this incredible event.

Remember, this is before the days of CGI. This is before Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas. This is an event which had not occurred before, in such a way as this. When Moses received the tablets, he was transfigured, and while Joshua was with him, he didn't actually witness the transfiguration of Moses.

Peter, James and John were up close and personal. Can you imagine? The sound, the sight, the smell of it all? Moses and Elijah appear out of nowhere and are chatting calmly with Jesus, as though it's just another day at Mt. Tabor, a simple Sunday afternoon stroll. Now, to be fair, Mt. Tabour is only 575 metres or about 688 yards high.

I know you're not supposed to have favourites, but I have to say, of all the apostles, Peter is my favourite. He's like a puppy in a grown man's body. He doesn't ever hesitate in answering. He was the first to recognise Jesus as Messiah and he's rewarded with learning he will be the one to advance the Church.

So Peter who is still excited from that fabulous promised promotion quickly puts together that Jesus was meeting with the O.G.'s. – Moses and Elijah.

He's beginning to more fully understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Then he also begins to realise that Jesus has to go to Jerusalem and die. And of course, Peter doesn't want that to happen.

And so –

Wait a minute. Before I go any further, I want to try something with me – okay? Do you trust me?

Think of the very best day you've ever had. Or if that's too difficult, think of the last time you had a great day. The kind of day where you don't worry about time. You don't worry about what to do next. In fact, you don't worry about anything at all. The kind of day you want to last forever. The kind of day you don't ever want to end.

That's what is happening to Peter. He's realising that this is the very best day he's ever had and he doesn't want it to end. He knows, in his heart, that Jesus is going to die sooner rather than later. He wants to prevent this, or at least, delay this for as long as possible. So he comes up with a brilliant idea. Let's just stay here!

"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." (Luke 9:33, NRSV) Peter doesn't want this day to end and he knows he has to protect Jesus, so let's just stay here. And Peter being Peter, well, that's not going to work.

A large cloud descended on the four men, who are described as terrified. This cloud was a thick heavy cover in which they could barely see their hands in front of their faces. And just as they are taking all of this in, "then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" (Luke 9:35, NRSV)

And if they weren't terrified before the voice, they most certainly were afterwards. I mean, this was THE voice of God. "This is my Son". These words had been uttered about three years before when Jesus was baptised by his cousin John, except that time, God said "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." (Luke 3.22, NRSV)

Peter, watch out for that cloud!

When Moses was transfigured, there was a cloud that covered Mt. Sinai for the 40 days and 40 nights Moses spent with God, getting the laws of the land, instructions for the ark of the covenant, etc. It's fascinating reading. If you're interested, check out the book of Exodus this afternoon.

Moses, watch out for the cloud!

On Friday and Saturday I participated in the Annual National Conference through Fierté Pride Canada, called "2SLGBTQI+ Movement Building: Past Present and Future". I watched three addresses; one on Decolonialising Board Governance, the Significance of Representation, and "Your Queerness does not erase your Whiteness". Each one of them discussed the struggles of being BIPOC or a person of colour; Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Indian, and so on.. We were asked a question yesterday afternoon. When did you know you were white? It was a very startling and unexpected question.

I learned that defining races by colour only began in the 15th Century and was used as a form of oppression. To be white simply meant that you were not black. And to be considered intelligent, advanced, sophisticated, you were white. If you were not white, you were "less than".

This kind of "othering" was the foundation for Residential schools. The white colonial way of belief that the only way to be was the Eurocentric way to be. If you were not European in descent, you had to become European.

Which meant becoming a Christian, having an easily pronounceable name and worshipping a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. If you didn't fit into these categories, you would be shoehorned into them.

Children were torn from families, tortured because of their culture. Starved, neglected, berated all in the name of assimilation. And it was wrong. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission opened the door to learning and unlearning for Colonial Settlers, and Canadian society at large. It became about repairing and atoning for the sins of our forefathers.

It is now about finding these long-lost graves of innocent children who may or may not have family still alive. It is about repatriating their remains in a culturally appropriate way, with incredible sensitivity and showing that we will continue to learn, continue to listen and keep telling the story to the next generations, until society has learned a new way. Where inclusion is a way of life, not merely a concept that seems distant and difficult to obtain.

Transfiguration is about an event so significant it will remain with you always and will change everything about you. Now while we may not have mountaintop experiences such as these, we can have transfiguring moments where we change spiritually, although maybe not physically.

I fear for the people of the Ukraine. I'm terrified about what will happen in the coming days. I'm afraid to read the new alerts that I receive on my phone because I'm so terrified we are heading back into a world war. Russia and its President are bullies. The Ukraine and its President are defiant in the face of adversity.

Yet without allied intervention, Ukraine may become a captured pawn in Russia's chess game. Europe has always been able to count on the allies of the West. This time is no exception. The Archbishop of Canterbury has called us to a global day of prayer for the people of Ukraine.

I invite you to join me in prayer.
Let us pray –

Almighty and everlasting God. Through you all things are possible.
We have seen your glory in the burning bush.
We have witnessed your glory in the transfigurations of Moses and of Jesus.
We pray for your continued presence with the people of the Ukraine.

We ask you to soften the hearts of Russia's leaders and show them that war is not the only way.

Please give hope for negotiations to continue that no more lives will be lost, property destroyed or families torn apart.

In the midst of our own fears and short-comings, we ask you to be with us and show us that love is the best way, and the only way, to overcome atrocity. Be with us in these next days as we watch helplessly from around the globe. Call us into action, as we are able, guiding us in our thoughts, words, and deeds in our lives.

May the Transfiguration of Jesus remind us that ordinary people, like Peter, can do extraordinary things through hope, love and compassion.

In your son's name we pray,

Amen.

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Sermon for Transfiguration - Luke 9.28-36
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