

MY CHOSEN ONE

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, February 7, 2016
Transfiguration Sunday – Communion
Higganum and Haddam Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Hebrew Bible Reading – Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with the Lord.



Christian Testament Reading – Luke 9:28-42

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 dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses



The Transfiguration by James Tissot

and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 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. 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. 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.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus



answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 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.

Mountaintop experiences come in many varieties. The highest elevation I've ever reached on a mountain is 11,500 feet above sea level—only twice in my lifetime. One of those times I was hiking by myself, on the Mt Whitney trail in California's Eastern Sierra. (The summit of Mt Whitney is 14,500 feet above sea level, so you can see that I wasn't even close to reaching the top of this, the highest mountain in the lower 48 states.) The other time I was with a small group of men, when we hiked to the summit of San Geronimo Peak in San Bernardino County in southern California.

It was a partly sunny/partly cloudy day when we reached the summit. We were enjoying lunch at 11,500 feet when we saw a developing thunder and lightning storm over a nearby mountain peak. It seemed like the storm was moving in our direction, so we wasted no time scrambling down from the summit, not wishing to end our lives and our mountaintop experience in a million-volt burst of lightning.

Today and next Sunday, the lectionary invites us to join Jesus for two of his mountaintop experiences, as we transition from Epiphany to Lent. Today's story is set on the Mount of Transfiguration; next Sunday's story is set on the Mount of Temptation. The relationship of these two stories isn't chronological, it's rather theological. (Jesus faced temptation on a high mountaintop long before his transfiguration on another high mountaintop.)

There's a lot going on in this nine-verse narrative. The vision of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah is a visual reminder of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, where he taught his disciples that he had come to fulfill the Law (represented here by Moses) and the Prophets (represented here by Elijah).

The vision of Jesus transfigured calls to mind when Moses came down from the summit of Mount Sinai, carrying with him the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, “the skin of his face [shining] because he had been talking with God” (Exodus 34:29). The vision of Jesus transfigured on the mountain is also a foreshadowing of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

The voice from the cloud hearkens back to the voice at Jesus' baptism, and it draws us forward to Jesus' words to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:18-20).

There's something else going on this narrative that I really hadn't noticed until this week, when I happened to come across a commentary that changed my perspective on Jesus' transfiguration. The author of this commentary, Debie Thomas, observes that the second episode in this story is just as important as the first episode. Hear how Debie Thomas retells the story.

“On the mountain, a man [deep] in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore [of his face], three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response—'Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!' A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. 'This is my Son, my Chosen.' The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master—the [Radiant] One—and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.'”

“In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes—wide-open, feral—see nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame. 'Frauds!' someone yells into the night. 'Charlatans!' 'Where's your Master?' the scribes ask the disciples an umpteenth time. 'Why has he left you?' 'We don't know,' the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again—an echo straight from hell. He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face.

A voice—strangled, singular—rends the [air]. 'This is my son! My only child!' a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child, his only child, against his chest. 'Please,' he sobs to the stars. 'Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him.'"¹

Debie Thomas' observation—that there are really *two* beloved sons in this story—has upended my expectations about the connection, the relationship, the complementarity between the beloved Son on the mountaintop and the beloved son in the valley. She observes of her own reading of this story:

"I don't have any particular arguments with Transfiguration theology — it's all lovely, I'm sure. But it leaves me cold. Maybe this is because my eyes aren't on the clouds this year; they're pretty earthbound. So here's what I'd like to know: how does glory on the mountain speak to agony in the valley? What does it mean that they share a landscape? Can a love song on a pinnacle reach a scream in the depths?"²

Seen in this light, the ancient sacred story of the Transfiguration tells of a time when a "love song on a pinnacle" reached a "scream in the depths." The "glory on the mountain" may have been a transient experience for Peter and James and John, but it also touched the "agony in the valley."

¹<http://journeywithjesus.net/essays/813-the-view-from-the-valley>.

²Ibid.

Two very different voices speak in this story. And both voices are heard. The disciples hear the voice of God, affirming Jesus' identity; Jesus hears the voice of the anguished father.

Isn't it the calling of the church to hear both voices? The voice of affirmation about Jesus, and the voices of anguish in our midst? Yes, it's important to remember that Jesus is the Beloved Son of God, and we must listen to him. And it's equally important to remember the many beloved children of God who are suffering in today's world. God's beloved children are suffering from many kinds of illnesses, like the epileptic boy whom Jesus healed. God's beloved children are suffering from many kinds of violence, such as those who have fled the violence in Syria and Iraq and are living in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon and Turkey.

We who follow Jesus may not possess the healing power of Jesus. But what we do possess is the power of compassion, the kind of compassion Jesus embodied time and again when he reached out to the least and the last and the lost of his time and place. We aren't listening to Jesus only on the shining mountaintop. We are also listening to him in the anguished valley.