

Year C Transfiguration Sunday – The Last Sunday after the Epiphany Luke 9 28 to 43a

This is the final Sunday before we begin our journey together through Lent. Luke's Gospel story today sets the tone for us as we enter into that journey. Lent has taken on a very sombre and penitential tone over the years – and there is legitimacy to that side of Lent. We will acknowledge that we are human and, since human, we are broken. But our ancient rite tells us to observe a holy Lent – not a mournful Lent. The knowledge of our sin is placed within the knowledge of our salvation through the mercy and forgiveness of God. We are redeemed in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a journey of preparation leading us to joyful celebration of Christ's resurrection – the event that gives us life and provides the foundation for our existence as Christians. And so, Lent is a time of subdued excitement, of barely contained joy – and today, Luke tells us why this is so.

Let's begin where Luke begins: "about eight days after these sayings." Jesus has been teaching his disciples how to live in the kingdom of God, to let go of life according to the ways of the world. Those who cling to this life, Jesus says, will not have life in the kingdom. And he ends with, "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." Immediately after this, Luke begins today's story: eight days later, Peter and James and John witness Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. Luke is telling his audience very plainly that Peter, James, and John witnessed the inbreaking of God's kingdom here on earth. Unfortunately, what was plain to Luke's audience is now lost on most modern-day Christians.

It is the reference to “eight days” here that gives everything away but the reference to “eight days” slides by, mostly unnoticed by today’s readers and hearers of the Gospel. The eighth day was extremely significant to early Christians. Perhaps you have a memory of me explaining a few years ago why all traditional baptismal fonts have eight sides. The number seven in Jewish tradition represents perfection. Eight, therefore, means something even greater than normal perfection. For early Christians, beyond normal perfection meant that God’s kingdom had come to fruition. When Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning, the Christians called that day the Lord’s Day in reference to the long-awaited Day of the Lord in Jewish tradition – the day when God would purge the world of evil and Israel would be restored to glory. That was the day when God’s kingdom would be perfected on earth. Christians began calling Sunday, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, the eighth day because Jesus began the awaited perfection. Jesus of Nazareth was the first to be resurrected in glory, never to die, never to suffer again. Jesus’ resurrection heralded the beginning of the Golden Age of God’s kingdom.

When we hear that the transfiguration takes place about eight days after Jesus had told his disciples that some of them would soon see the kingdom, we know that in the transfiguration we are catching a glimpse of that kingdom. As Jesus is praying, we see his face change and, as with Moses, we know that his face is glowing with the knowledge, the joy, and the glory of being in the presence of God. Not only that, we are seeing the divinity of Jesus. His clothes become a dazzling white signaling a perfection of purity not experienced on earth.

With Jesus, appear Moses and Elijah – two pivotal figures in salvation history. In Moses and Elijah we have all of the law and the prophets coming together to be with Jesus, who is the love of God made manifest. He shows to us the embodiment of the two great commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets. Jesus shows to us the perfect love of God and the perfect love of neighbour. In the law given to us through Moses, we were told how to live in order to be in right relationship with God and with neighbour. In the prophets we learned that, although we continuously break these laws of love, there would come a time when God would write them on our hearts. The Messiah would come, bringing the kingdom, and giving us passage into that kingdom through God's love.

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus – the law, the prophets, and God's love – are talking about Jesus' approaching "exodus" from Jerusalem. Luke is the only Gospel writer who includes any detail about the topic of their conversation and Luke very deliberately uses the word, "exodus." God led his people, through Moses, in the Exodus from Egypt, leading them out of bondage into freedom, bringing them to a land where they would live according to the ways of God's kingdom – ways of equity, justice, and inclusion. Living this way, though, was something that humans could not sustain. Jesus, through his death on the cross and his resurrection to imperishable life in God's kingdom, is about to accomplish a new Exodus for God's people. He will open the kingdom of heaven for all believers, freeing them from the ways of the world, freeing them from death. Through the mystery of baptism, we participate in Christ's death and resurrection. We are brought into relationship with God in God's kingdom.

In the first Exodus from Egypt, God accompanied his people as a pillar of cloud by day. Here, on the mountain, we again have the presence of God in a cloud, claiming Jesus as his Son and giving to him all of God's power and authority in the command, "Listen to him!"

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, Luke has provided us with the sure and certain hope that God is indeed working towards the fulfillment of his promise that, one day, God's kingdom will be completely and fully revealed in perfection on earth as in heaven. We are told that Jesus is the crucial piece in this fulfillment. In Jesus, the law and the prophets come together – the law that tells us how to live in order to achieve perfect life in God's kingdom, the prophets that tell us over and over again that this promise will be fulfilled, the Messiah will come, and Jesus who is the love of God will provide our passage into this kingdom through the new Exodus of his death and resurrection.

But Luke does not stop here – his message of joy and hope continues with yet another piece of information. Jesus brings the kingdom down from the mountain into the midst of the people. A man approaches Jesus, begging him to heal his only son who is possessed, he says, by an evil spirit. As the spirit, right on cue, grabs hold of the boy, throwing him into convulsions, Jesus rebukes the spirit and heals the boy. With a word, Jesus has delivered this boy...and the crowd, we are told, are astounded at the greatness of God. In Luke's Gospel, we have seen this amazing power before: Jesus rebuked the fever of Peter's mother-in-law and she was healed (Luke 4:39); Jesus rebuked the raging wind threatening to swamp their boat and the wind ceased (Luke 8:24). At the very beginning of this chapter, Jesus gives this power to his disciples – the power over all demons and to heal

(Luke 9:1) yet, we hear today that the disciples were unable to cast out this demon and heal the boy. We, perhaps, witness some frustration on Jesus' part – he has given his power and authority to his disciples yet, it seems, they cannot use it...at least, not yet. In his words of frustration, Jesus, too, reveals a longing for the coming perfection of God's kingdom. The miracles Jesus performs are not simply proof of God's power, they are the inbreaking of the kingdom. The perfection brought about by Jesus' miracles is the perfection the whole world will know when God's kingdom is fully revealed. Jesus heals the boy because, in God's kingdom, all people will be healed. Luke drives home the point we often forget...Jesus brought the kingdom. We await its perfection. We live in God's kingdom – Jesus' death and resurrection were our salvation. What we do as Christians living in the kingdom impacts the further revelation of that kingdom.

Each Sunday, on the eighth day, we enter into God's perfect kingdom as we enter into worship together. We remember and relive, at God's table, our salvation accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection and we pray for this for the whole world. We are about to remember and relive the events that led to this salvation – that gave us life in God's kingdom – and Luke has set the stage. Soon after today's story, Luke tells us that Jesus turns his face resolutely toward Jerusalem. As Jesus does, so now do we. As we turn our face toward the cross and enter into our Lenten journey, we are not gloomy. The undercurrent of barely suppressed excitement and joy fills the air with electricity. Our passage into God's kingdom awaits us.