

Year C Transfiguration Sunday The Greatness of God Luke 9 28 to 43

Perhaps you've seen the signs or memes that say things like, "Thoughts and Prayers Are Not Enough"? Or, using language that I won't use here, "We don't want your thoughts and prayers"? We see these sentiments pop up every time there is a violent mass shooting in the states and, much less frequently in Canada when something horrible makes the news. But prayer is extremely important and Luke definitely agrees. Today, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. It is while he is in the midst of praying that an amazing change happens to him. But Luke also makes it clear that prayer does not stand alone – Prayer is always the prelude to action. Luke also tells us today why we pray and why we act which bears huge significance for us here.

Throughout Luke's Gospel story – and through his book of Acts as well – prayer sets the stage for major events, decisions, and ministry moments in Jesus' life and in the lives of his disciples as they carry on his mission. We have some very deeply embedded ideas about prayer that lead us into troubling questions: If God knows everything, why are we praying? When we get what we ask for, we say "Prayer works" so what about all of those other times when prayer seems to go unanswered? Does God not listen? Does God not love me? Is my faith not great enough?

Prayer, as we learned in our Prayer Studies together, is first and foremost, our way of being in a deep, loving relationship with God – feeling God's love, being filled with God's love, and becoming God's love. When Jesus spent time in prayer, he was spending time in his Father's presence, listening and waiting for God's help to discern his path forward, discovering what he was meant to do and to be for God

and with God's support. Prayer – for us as it was for Jesus – is laying the foundation for everything else in our lives.

Today is no different. We witness a pivotal moment in Jesus' life and we see his dependence on, and strong relationship with God the Father as he faces that moment. Peter has recently declared to Jesus that he is the Messiah and, confusingly for Peter and the rest of the disciples, Jesus' response is that he is going to be tortured and killed by the religious leaders but be raised on the third day. In the sobering reality of this horrible death facing him, Jesus feels the need to pray.

And so, he goes up a mountain to pray. This is an intimate encounter between him and the Father and he brings with him just his three closest friends and disciples: Peter, James, and John. It is while Jesus in the act of praying that his face changes – becomes other, is how Luke describes it – and his clothes become a dazzling white. We are witnessing the radiant glory that is given to us when we are in the presence of God, just as we hear about in the story of Moses whose face glowed after being in God's presence. Today, a cloud appears – just as the cloud, God's presence, led the Israelites in the Exodus from Egypt, and then, to be sure there is no doubt that God is indeed present, we hear God's voice from out of the cloud claiming Jesus as his Son.

This experience, this "becoming other", comes roughly in the middle of Luke's Gospel and connects together the saving events of Jesus' life both before and after. It looks backwards to Jesus' birth, mentioning the cloud that overshadows the disciples reminds us that Mary was told by Gabriel she would be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. In hearing God's voice today, we remember that

we also heard God's voice at Jesus' baptism, when God first declared Jesus as his Son in whom he is well pleased.

This "becoming other" also points us forward, to Jesus' death on the cross. On that day, Jesus will again be on a hilltop above the others around him, again with two men but, this time, the men are criminals. And here, on the cross, a transfiguration of a different type takes place. This time, Jesus' face is marred with sweat and blood, disfigured by agony, yet radiating love. "Father, forgive them," he says and the disciples finally understand what kind of messiah their teacher is. Their confused silence at being told he would be a messiah who is tortured and killed begins to fade as his teachings fall into place for them...love, compassion, humility, service of others, forgiveness. This is the kind of messiah they had walked with. This is who they are meant to become. As their hearts and minds are transformed, as they "become other", this is the moment for us, too, to understand...this is the transformation we must undergo as we pattern our lives after the Messiah revealed on the cross: a Messiah of love, compassion, humility, service of others, forgiveness.

This is our key – our key to allowing Jesus to lead *our* exodus...away from the wrongness, the brokenness of the world into the wholeness of life in God's kingdom. Luke has placed a flashing neon sign in this Gospel story to make sure we understand this. "Eight days after this," he writes. "Eight days" is a reference that the early Church, in hearing this story, would have immediately understood. Early Christians called Sunday the eighth day of the week. Here is how Alexander Schmemmann explains this:

Christ rose from the dead on the *first day* after the Sabbath. The life that shone forth from the grave was beyond the inescapable limitations of 'seven,' of time that leads to death. It was thus the beginning of a new life and of a new time. It was truly the eighth and the first day and it became the day of the Church...on the one hand, Sunday remained *one of the days* (for three centuries it was not even a day of rest), the first day of the week, fully belonging to this world. Yet, on that day, through the eucharistic ascension, the Day of the Lord was revealed and manifested in all its glory and transforming power as the *end* of this world, [and] the *beginning* of the world to come" (For the Life of the World, p.63, 64).

Jesus had opened the kingdom of heaven. Life in God's kingdom was now theirs. But it wasn't quite what they had thought it would be. The kingdom was here – but not perfect – and they had been tasked with carrying on Jesus' work of bringing it to its perfection.

Just as Jesus' baptism comes before and empowers his first phase of earthly ministry, the transfiguration comes before and empowers the second half of his ministry – the ministry that brings him to the cross. In both events, the voice of God speaks directly to us...This is my Son, we hear. But, today, we hear the added words: "Listen to him!" Listen to his teachings, follow his example. We are being compelled to allow God's words to empower our ministries today. And to do that, we must come down from the mountain top.

You've likely heard the expression "mountain top experience." It's the wonderful, inspirational moment we feel God's presence and experience joyful clarity in our

purpose. We all have wonderful moments, joyful moments that we'd like to hang onto...a relaxing vacation, a family dinner, time alone watching the sunrise...whatever it is for you. However, not everyone has a huge spiritual mountain top experience – and not everyone needs to. Perhaps you noticed that only three out of the 12 disciples went up the mountain and had the experience? The rest of the disciples are like the majority of people today. They don't have the mountain top experience but they follow Jesus anyway. They share the hope and excitement of the event because it was shared with them by the three who did experience it. As much as the few on the mountain top may want to prolong the wonderful experience, we are meant to return to earth to share the experience. We bring hope by bringing witness.

What begins on the mountain, in prayer in the presence of God, must be carried into the world. A mountain top experience, becoming closer and closer to God through prayer, changes our perspective but it does not change our circumstances. The hard work of healing ourselves and healing our world happens on the ground below.

And this is very hard work...there is a lot to be mended. It is prayer, here together and alone, it is prayer – our deepening relationship with God – that rejuvenates and guides us in our exodus through the wilderness, slowly but surely becoming other, slowly but surely helping the world to become other, patterning our life after our God: loving, compassionate, humbly serving, forgiving. Life in God's kingdom is ours but it is a life we must continuously work at living. Mother Teresa says, "When you look at the inner working of electrical things, you often see small and big wires, new and old, cheap and expensive, all lined up. Until the current

passes through them there will be no light. That wire is you and me,” she says.

“The current is God. We have the power to let the current pass through us, use us, produce the light of the world. Or we can refuse to be used and allow darkness to spread” (p.8 of *Mother Teresa Her Essential Wisdom*). Let us choose the light of the glory of transfiguration and let’s help the world be “astounded at the greatness of God.”