

Who is Jesus for you? What are you hoping God will do in your life? I wonder if the gospel reading for today, Jesus appearing in glory with Peter and James and John present might help to answer those questions. The disciples seem to need this kind of revelatory experience in order to appreciate Jesus' true identity and vocation.

Unfortunately, even this amazing event proves insufficient. What will it take for us preachers to come to know Jesus and share that experience with assembled congregations who long for an encounter with glory? A significant dimension of Luke's transfiguration account also points toward the Gospel's distinctive interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Note how the reading starts – Jesus prays – as often in the gospel, Jesus prays after some major event, or like here and in the garden of Gethsemane before one – someone recently said that Jesus in Gethsemane before he is betrayed with Peter, James and John is almost like the picture negative of today's event with its transformation of glory.

Having fortified himself with prayer, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Likewise, the transfiguration will follow a moment of intimate prayer. The sequence moves through (a) Peter's confession of Jesus as messiah through (b) Jesus' teaching concerning the Son of Man and (c) Jesus' forbidding invitation to would-be disciples on to (d) the transfiguration itself.

The previous revelatory moments are heard in words; the transfiguration bathes words in glory.

If Peter correctly identifies Jesus as God's messiah (Luke 9:20), Jesus emphatically prohibits a promotional campaign. Luke's literary crafting suggests the reason: If Peter rightly names Jesus' role, it is left to Jesus to spell out what that role entails. The Son of Man "must suffer many things" before being raised from the dead. If Peter's confession entails a revelation, all the more so for Jesus' instruction. How could the disciples possibly understand and translate Jesus' words?

They have no reason to imagine a messiah who suffers prior on the way to glory.

Let's not be confused about who Jesus is – it's significant that Jesus counters Peter's messianic confession with teaching concerning the Son of Man.

The transfiguration clearly shows the glory that Peter, James, and John had perhaps anticipated. There's so much to be found in the imagery: dazzling light, heroes from Israel's history, glory, a cloud, a heavenly voice, and mere human beings like Peter who struggle in responding to the visionary moment. Peter, James, and John cannot overcome sleep's alluring gravity.

The transfiguration of Jesus follows immediately on the scene where Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah (Luke 9:20).

That scene ends with Jesus' teaching on the coming glory of God's kingdom to be experienced by the disciples (9:26-27). The transfiguration scene provides a dramatic confirmation of Peter's confession and a foretaste of the glory to be experienced when God's kingdom is fully present. So let's look at the passage (Luke 9:28-36 p1040)

Who is Jesus?

The emphasis throughout the episode is on the dazzling proclamation – sound and visual – of Jesus' identity. We are first given the description of his transformed appearance (verse 29). The change in the appearance of his face is reminiscent of Moses' face becoming radiant upon experiencing the presence of God in Exodus 34:29-35. But the description of the change in Jesus' clothes distinguishes him from Moses significantly: Jesus' clothes become "dazzling white," words Luke uses to describe the appearance of angelic figures in Luke 24:4 and Acts 1:10. Jesus' transformed appearance is thus not merely because he is experiencing God's glory (like Moses) but rather because he is the very source of divine glory. The point is

made explicit when the three disciples are said to see Jesus' glory in verse 32. All others reflect the glory of God – Jesus shines with the glory of God – they are the moon, he is the Sun! Echoing Hebrews 1:3 – he is the radiance of God's glory.

Who is Jesus – affirmed by Moses, and Elijah

The appearance of Moses and Elijah in verse 30 adds to who Jesus is. The two are commonly interpreted as embodying "the Law and the Prophets," which is no doubt a significant point. The risen Jesus himself will later assert that Moses and the prophets point toward him (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46). Luke tells us in our scene that Moses and Elijah "were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (verse 31), surely meant to anticipate Jesus' teaching that he is the ultimate fulfillment of scripture. I've only been to Greece once – it was 1983, travelling overland by train from what was then Yugoslavia – when we entered Greece our passports were stamped – eisodos – when we left (for Italy) they were stamped 'exodos' – that's the word Luke uses here – his exodos – Jesus, like Moses before, would lead people into a new land – the kingdom of God – the difference, as the word also means, was as a result of his death on the cross – the death he's already shared with his followers, and the death that Peter so violently questioned. But not just Moses and the exodus are mentioned. So too Elijah = his appearance is linked with the coming of the day of the Lord. (Malachi 4:5). So the appearance of Moses and Elijah points to Jesus fulfilling specific prophecies associated with them as well as the more general notion of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of scripture.

The Voice and Presence of God

The most dramatic way that this passage speaks of Jesus' identity comes with the voice of God in verse 35. The basic message echoes the divine words spoken at Jesus' baptism (3:22), but there are notable differences:

- The message at Jesus' baptism was spoken directly to Jesus ("You are my son"), but here the message is for the disciples' ears ("This is my son").
- At the baptism the adjective describing Jesus' sonship was "beloved" -- again, a message directed at Jesus -- but here it is "chosen," further describing Jesus' relationship to God from the disciples' perspective.
- The message of Jesus' sonship here is given an imperative implication: "Listen to him!" Jesus' sonship is not a matter of abstract theology but requires the obedient response of the disciples to Jesus' message. Jesus' most recent teaching emphasized the costly demands made on those who would follow him, i.e. denying themselves and taking up their cross (verse 23), and that is surely the primary message meant to be listened to and obeyed here. As we begin the season of Lent this week will we walk with Jesus? Will we repent of our sins – Ash Wednesday service and turn to Christ. Will we commit ourselves to studying God's word – Wednesday evenings (Passion – extract we saw at beginning of the service)
- Whereas the voice at the baptism came "from heaven," here it comes from the very cloud in which the disciples are already enveloped. This suggests a rather intense experience of God's close presence! It also is again reminiscent of Moses' own experience of God's presence at Sinai (see Exodus 24:15-18), the most formative revelation of God in the history of Israel.

So, firstly this passage answers our first question – who is Jesus. Now to The second – What are you expecting God to do in your life?

The Experience of God in Prayer

One of the significant details of the story that is unique to Luke's account of the transfiguration is that it occurs in the context of prayer. Neither Matthew nor Mark mentions that Jesus had gone up on the mountain specifically to pray (verse 28), and neither mentions that Jesus was praying when the transfiguration occurs (verse 29). It is clearly a point that Luke wants us to note.

Prayer is, in fact, a significant theme throughout Luke's writings. Luke is the only Gospel author to tell us of Jesus praying on other momentous occasions, too:

- Following his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus while he is praying (3:21-22);
- Jesus' selection of the twelve apostles occurs after spending an entire night in prayer (6:12-16);
- Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah occurs in the context of Jesus' praying (9:18-20).

As I've already mentioned, one other key place where Luke shows Jesus praying include in the garden before his arrest (22:39-46) and have you ever noticed that Luke also has Jesus praying on the cross (23:34, 46).

A point that we may especially observe in the transfiguration account, but which is also present in some of these other places, is that prayer for Jesus involved, at times, a dramatic encounter of God's presence.

Prayer was not merely speaking words to God but was a truly spiritual experience of God. Lest we think that such a possibility of divine encounter is limited to Jesus, we see the same thing with a variety of characters in Acts, Luke's second volume. To give just a few of many examples:

- The gathered early church experienced a dramatic divine response to their communal prayer (4:23-31).
- The centurion Cornelius's prayers result in an angel being sent to him and in him being chosen by God as the first Gentile Christian (10:1-8).
- Paul and Silas are freed from prison by God while praying (16:25-34).
- Paul experiences an encounter with the risen Christ while praying (22:17-21).

So while we should **not** expect to have experiences like that of Jesus in the transfiguration on a regular basis in prayer, the transfiguration along with these other scenes should challenge us to seek something more in prayer than speaking mere words in the hope that God might possibly somehow listen to us.

Prayer is seeking the powerful presence of God in our lives. Many of us may already have discovered that. It's a discipline which we are called to develop. Spending time with the Creator of the universe, made possible because of the Death of his Son Jesus on the cross, and the promise of the Holy Spirit will change us, but how? It's worth remembering, with the disciples in this scene, that dramatic experiences of Christ's glory come with the call to listen and follow in costly obedience.

(reflection)