

But the Face is Familiar

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Luke 9:28-36 As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, how good it is that we are here! We will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (He did not really know what he was saying.) (v.33)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Faithfulness requires trusting that God is leading us to a future even more blessed than what we have experienced or can imagine.

The gospel reading that is suggested for this day – commonly called the story of "The Transfiguration" --is an unusual story.

It's unusual because although it purports to tell of an event that occurred during the preaching and teaching ministry of Jesus, many scholars think that the story originally described an experience the disciples had with Jesus *after* he had been crucified and resurrected. In other words, it's a post-resurrection story that has been placed during the life of Jesus for a reason I'll suggest in a moment.

Also, this story is unusual because it shows how the Christian church has had to compress the calendar in order to fit the life of Jesus into a yearly cycle. Realize that just over a month ago we were singing songs about a "little town of Bethlehem" and "three kings of orient." Even if Lent and Easter didn't fall as early on the calendar as they do this year, we'd still be spanning the thirty-three years from the birth of Jesus to his crucifixion in a matter of about twelve to fifteen weeks. Maybe that's why the story has been moved to this point in the gospel: it signals a turning point for Jesus, sending him from his traveling ministry toward the challenge that awaits him in Jerusalem, the seat of religious and political and military power in Palestine.

So this story is unusual because it might have been inserted in the wrong place in the gospels; the story's unusual because it artificially compresses the life of Jesus into just a few weeks; and the story's unusual because it describes a supernatural event in which weird things happen that are hard to understand.

Let's review the six things we heard in the story:

- 1) Jesus withdrew to a mountain to pray with three of his disciples.
- 2) He was transfigured – his appearance changed without any discernable cause.
- 3) Two epic figures of Jewish history – Moses and Elijah – appeared in conversation with Jesus.
- 4) Sleepy Peter awakens to behold this bizarre sight and suggests pitching hospitality tents for "The Big Three."
- 5) A cloud descends and talks to the disciples, telling them to heed Jesus.
- 6) The disciples respond by clamming up, telling no one (at least at that time) about what they had experienced.

It's not surprising that Jesus took time to pray, or that he got away from the commotion of daily life to do it, or that he took some of his disciples with him... or even that they fell asleep while trying to keep up with their master's prayer life. As you may remember, the disciples would do that again in the Garden of Gethsemane, falling asleep while Jesus prayed just before Jesus was arrested and put on trial leading to his crucifixion. So that's not the supernatural, weird part of the story.

But this is: while Jesus was praying, his appearance changed. It's as if his clothing glowed like a neon sign. His face changed, too, although we're not told what happened. (Did it become another color, or transparent, or become like a mirror? Did his face suddenly become like that of a child? Or a woman? Or like someone of a different ethnicity? The Bible simply says that it "changed.") Truthfully, the disciples could have told Jesus, "We've never seen you like this before!"

As if that weren't enough, suddenly they saw the figures of the monumental Moses and prophetic Elijah — fellas who had been dead 800-1,200 years! — standing there conversing with Jesus.

As I thought about it, the question occurred to me: How did the disciples know who those two were? They wouldn't have seen portraits of Moses or Elijah. The two weren't wearing nametags. We know who they were because the gospel tells us. But somehow Peter and James and John knew, too.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah had powerful symbolism: they symbolized a phrase we hear often in the Bible — "the law and the prophets."

We may think of laws as restrictive, but everything needs some sort of laws, some system of rules. Imagine driving a car without laws and rules about where you're allowed to drive, and how to interact with other motorists. Imagine going to a market without rules about what can be offered for sale and how purchases can be paid for. Imagine basketball or baseball or golf or football without rules. Rules and laws are put in place for our long-term benefit.

Ever since presenting the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Moses was revered as the one who presented the Israelites with the guidance of God's law. Moses was the face of the law of God.

And as for prophets, they didn't predict the future like some divinely-ordained fortune-teller. Biblical prophets received revelations from God that the prophets, in turn, were to reveal to the people. Sometimes the prophetic message was "straighten up your life." Sometimes the message was "take care of the poor among you." Sometimes the message was "stop bowing to other things and powers and return to worshiping me, the One Living God." Although there's no Old Testament book named after Elijah like there is for Isaiah or Jeremiah or Micah or others, Elijah was one of the most revered of the Israelite prophets. To the Jews Elijah was the face of prophetic pronouncement.

So in a scene defying time and space and matter we see Moses the face of religious law and standards, and Elijah the face of religious prophetic witness, conversing with Jesus. Here's how one Bible scholar described what it meant. He wrote:

We've met Moses....

That is, we know the law. We know we fail miserably to keep it.

[We've met Elijah.]

We've heard the prophet. We know we're called to holiness. We know we've failed miserably to [fulfill our obligation to] live righteously as we should.

Now meet Jesus.

He kept the law of God -- perfectly.

He lived a life of holiness -- perfectly.

And -- wait for it -- the good part is that God has agreed to accept his perfection on our behalf.

Now, we are "free from the law...", and free from religious obligations. This does not mean we're lawless or have no obligations. Even Jesus said ["Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come

true]¹. No, because someone has kept the law for us when we could not keep it ourselves, we are able... to follow Jesus and serve God motivated by love and thanksgiving.

That's Jesus, the face of the gospel, the face of good news. The law and the prophets have been fulfilled in Christ who calls us to a new life in him.²

Having seen Jesus with Moses and Elijah, the apostle Peter blurts out something like, "Master, how perfect that we're here to see this! We should erect monuments for the three of you to preserve this moment forever!"

Peter didn't get it. Luke points it out plainly, commenting parenthetically in verse 33, "(He did not really know what he was saying.)"

Peter saw this summit meeting as a gathering of the greats, like an "old-timers' game" or a confab of world leaders or an assemblage of all-stars that should be memorialized for the ages. Peter wanted to "stay on the mountaintop... [and] live in the radiance of that moment. [But] discipleship involves following, going on[, moving on]."³ Not staying in one place. Peter didn't get it.

What we can learn from this story of an other-worldly apparition is a lesson that applies to followers of Jesus today as much as it did to those disciples huddled in awe on a mountain peak. One writer expressed it this way: "Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced."⁴ I read two things in that statement:

First, we follow Jesus confident "...that God is leading." You realize, don't you, that wherever God is leading you, God is already there. Why would you be hesitant or fearful about your life being led in a direction where you will still encounter God?

And second, "...what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced." I like my life. I love it. I enjoy my life even with the arthritis and the bifocals and other consequences of aging. My years are blessed with family members and friends and colleagues. It's my privilege to fulfill my ministerial calling among this community of believers. I'm privileged to live in this delightful corner of God's great creation.

I love and enjoy my life and look forward to continuing to do so for a long time... but not forever. Someday I will die; I'll cease to be part of all those things I just lifted up as treasures. But any sadness that thought may evoke in me is dispelled by my trust in Jesus who has promised, "I am going to prepare a place for you.... And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am."⁵

We can learn from Peter and James and John who imagined – wrongly – that freezing a moment in time was all that was needed to follow Jesus. They discovered that "Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced."⁶

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¹ Matthew 5:17 Good News Translation

² from "Jesus – the Face of the Good News." Homiletics.com for February 7, 2016
http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040943

³ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 207.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John 14:2b, 3 Good News Translation

⁶ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 207.