

Mountain Top Experiences

Transfiguration Sunday--in many ways this is an intimidating topic...It has been analyzed and theorized about for close to two thousand years--probably since shortly after it was recorded. After all, how do you explain a mystery in the age of science and enlightenment? Just what does transfiguration mean--what was the meaning to those who were present, those who recorded the event as it was related to them, and more relevantly for us, what do we make of it today? As with all scripture passages, there are several ways they can be viewed--several questions which we can ask-- Our text begins by telling us there is an eight day gap in the narration of Jesus' activities. Before this the narration has been very busy recording that Jesus has been traveling through villages teaching and healing on both sides of the Sea of Galilee--thus Jesus has been very actively, almost urgently speaking to both Jews and Gentiles--then Luke tells us there is a time period about which he is going to tell us nothing. We don't know why he specifically tells us there this pause in his story. We don't know if this is because nothing noteworthy happened, just more of the same activity or if Jesus had suddenly stopped doing these teachings and healings. Why did Jesus go up on the mountain? Our text in Luke states he went up on the mountain to pray. Praying is not an unusual occurrence for Jesus to do. Actually, there are several times when each of the gospel writers tell us Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray...but as the passage continues this obviously turns out to be a different experience. Tradition in Palestine says that Mount Tabor is the site of the Transfiguration. I have only seen Mount Tabor from a distance, from the position of another holy site which is well below and at a distance. From there you can see a monastery that is built into the mountain side, but the top cannot be reached at all due to the hostilities currently present in the region. From the distance, it appears a mountain like any other in the landscape of this section of the world. So from where I stood it would not be possible to tell if that particular mountain top was different from other mountain tops of the area. The landscape of this region is a diverse topography marked by hills and valleys, fertile plains and arid desert, mountains and wilderness--in close proximity to one another. Some traditions also place this as the mountain which figures in the story of the Temptation when Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tested. Mountains and mountain tops can play many roles and represent many things--that is their nature figuratively and literally. Mountains rise up from the plains of our lives to invite majesty and awe; wonder and fear; to represent problems and challenges; to call to mind the heights of the heavens and yet the reality of the valleys below. So does the placement of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor in specific or on a mountain top in general have significance for what happens? Mountains in general have a way of being disruptive. In geography they interrupt the flow of travel. When the view is from the summit, they have a way of changing your framework of observation, perhaps by giving a different perspective--a longer view---they change the way you view the world or a particular problem which may be troubling you. Although Matthew and Mark both record the transfiguration as occurring after a break in activity, only Luke states that Jesus' purpose on going to the mountain top was to pray. We are told Jesus goes alone to pray after the first healings in Capernaum. Jesus goes up a mountain alone to pray after feeding the multitudes. Often after descriptions where he has healed he goes alone to pray. So the recording of Jesus

going to pray is not unusual. However, all three accounts say that Jesus on this occasion took with him Peter, John and James. This is the first difference in the unfolding of this event that we can see. In this instance, he takes along three others, Peter, John and James—disciples who have been with him from the beginning. The text does not tell us why Jesus takes them along, nor do we have any other time that he takes others along to pray or watch with him until we get to Gethsemane. But it seems that this may be an important connection. There are a couple of other details in this narrative of Luke which are not found in either Matthew or Mark which also connect to what is coming. The three disciples according to verse 32, become “weighed down with sleep; but since they stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.” In Gethsemane, the disciples could not stay awake, here although they became sleepy, they remained awake and thus saw his glory—the divinity of Jesus shine through his humanity as he was praying. While Jesus is praying he is visited by two men, Moses and Elijah who come to talk with him. Again, neither Matthew nor Mark says anything about this conversation other than it took place. Luke however tells us they were speaking “of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” When we read the English translations which use a very correctly translated word for the Greek—departure but the equally accurate translation could be exodus. And we miss a deeply rooted connection that the original audiences would have made—the transliterated word would be exodus (ἐξοδον). Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah about his exodus from life on earth which would be accomplished soon in Jerusalem. Moses, the one God chose to give the chosen people the Torah and to lead the exodus out of slavery in Egypt—the one to redeem them from slavery. Elijah whose exodus as a man of God is by ascension into the heavens by way of a chariot into a cloud. These significant figures from Jewish tradition also appeared in glory are speaking with Jesus about his coming exodus which represents a salvific mission in which God’s Messiah will suffer and die before he is raised and vindicated in glory. Although this trip up to the top of the mountain follows after about an eight day gap of narrated activity, it comes only about ten verses after Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah of God and Jesus’ response and explanation of exactly what being God’s anointed meant: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” The exodus—the departure—of Jesus which is being discussed by Jesus with Moses and Elijah operates on three levels: a reminder of the first exodus through which God used Moses to redeem the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, an anticipated euphemism for the death by which Jesus will save God’s people for all time this time, and finally the ascension of the resurrected Christ after he is raised and vindicated in glory. If we consider these additions to the transfiguration event, some of our questions are answered. As Jesus draws nearer to the reality of what completing his salvific mission will cost, the need to take some close friends and go up on the mountain top—to get away for awhile and get a better perspective on the mission—perhaps that reveals the deeply human side of Jesus. But then we have the description that “while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” And in verse 32b, we are told that the disciples saw “his glory”. And while I think that exploring the questions about why Jesus may have gone to that mountain top through the details that Luke gives us a deeper understanding of the humanity of Jesus, we find the answers about transfigurations in those two verses. The appearance of Jesus’ face changed in the eyes of the disciples, Jesus’

face did not change. On that mountain top, as he was praying, they beheld his glory—it was always there, but down in the valley—they did not perceive it so clearly. On the mountain top Jesus' divinity was more clearly revealed to them. This revelation flusters and confuses Peter, and perhaps in a natural desire to prolong this special experience, Peter makes the suggestion he makes: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah". The narrator—inserts—not knowing what he said. We often focus on Peter's desire to remain on the mountain top as being inappropriate, as being out of place. Moses and Elijah are leaving as he makes his suggestion, and as he makes the suggestion a cloud comes and overshadows the disciples terrifying them. Now in addition to the revelation of seeing Jesus' glory, they experience God's presence overshadowing them. Then from the cloud a voice comes declaring: "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Now all of the disciples become terrified. And the experience is over. Jesus was alone. And according to Luke they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. The narrator deemed Peter's idea for building shelters as foolish—he did not know what he said was the comment. Moses and Elijah were already leaving as he spoke. That's the thing about mountain top experiences—as permanent as mountains are—the experiences on mountain tops are fleeting. Although the lectionary offers us the chance to end the text at verse 36 with the disciples silence, Jesus and the disciples did not stay on the mountain top. Verse 37, "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him." Jesus is greeted with a crisis—not only of a father with a son who needs healing, but one his remaining disciples had been unable to heal. Jesus' return from the mountain top experience (and that of Peter, James and John) provides an urgent reminder of the realities that exist beyond the mountain top. Mountain top experiences are wonderful and to be treasured, but we are called to listen to our Lord and follow him into the valleys caring for those we encounter there who need healing and care. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.