

## Who Would You Choose?

### Luke 9:28-43

Today is known as transfiguration Sunday. Our scripture occurs in the Gospel of Luke as a moment when Jesus' identity was revealed to the inner circle of his disciples. Jesus took three of his disciples to a mountaintop to pray. "While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (v. 29). The glory of Jesus shone through, illuminating and highlighting his divine nature. Peter, James, and John almost missed it. They had already failed to take seriously or understand Jesus' proclamation that he would suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised on the third day (v. 22), and they were sleepy on the mountain.

As Jesus was transformed, he was joined by Moses and Elijah, also in great splendor. They talked with him; specifically, they spoke of the coming death of Jesus in Jerusalem. The heavy-lidded Peter, John, and James (again) failed to grasp the meaning of the conversation, with its veiled terms of departure and fulfillment. Peter, James, and John failed to see the presence of Moses and Elijah and their conversation with Jesus as evidence that the Christ had come in fulfillment of Israel's laws and prophecies.

Jesus choose Moses and Elijah to come from the other side to talk with him, encourage him and comfort him as he faced the real purpose of his coming to Earth to be the savior of the world. Why these two men...who were they?

Moses was the great liberator and law giver. He was born of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. He was raised and grew as a prince of Egypt for 40 years. However, when he tried to take matters into his own hands to liberate his people he killed an Egyptian and ran away to the desert and became a shepherd for the next 40 years. When God was ready for him, Moses was sent back to Egypt to

liberate the Israelites. Through him God performed 10 wonders and the people were sent away with all their possessions and more. God showed Moses visions of rules for living together as God's faithful people; gave him patterns for making the tabernacle and all its furnishings; the priesthood; the offerings; the system of justice...all they needed to become a nation and a witness and model for being God's people in the world. Maybe Jesus chose Moses because Moses' face also shone and he liberated the people from slavery – while Jesus' task was to liberate people from their sins and bring them into right relationship with God.

So who was this Elijah? Why did Jesus choose him? Elijah was a Tishbite from Gilead, who predicted a drought during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel. God told him to hide in a ravine east of the Jordan, where he would drink from the brook and be fed by ravines. Later he went to Zarephat in Sidon where a widow who was down to her last resources supplied him with food and because of her generosity her resources lasted until the drought ended. This Elijah was used by God to restore life to a dead boy. After 3 ½ years of drought God used him to show the people of Israel that God was the true God of the universe rather than the Baal in a contest of worship on Mount Carmel with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Then he was fed by angels. After an encounter and encouragement from God, he became the anointer of kings and speaker of truth to power.

What did these men have in common? All fasted 40 days and 40 nights; and lived to tell about it. All had encounters with God on mountains. All spoke directly with God. Both Moses and Elijah divided water and walked through on dry land. Both had walked with God and knew that God would do what had never been done before. They could give Jesus assurance and confidence that the journey to Jerusalem would accomplish what it was designed to do. It would make salvation available to all who would believe.

So who would you choose to encourage you? Would it be Moses and Elijah? Would you include David, a man after God's on heart? Would you choose Solomon, the wise king and builder of the first Jerusalem temple? Would you be like King Saul and choose Samuel the judge, prophet and the one who anointed him first king of Israel? Would you have chosen Elisha, who received a double portion of Elijah's spirit? Would it have been Sarah and Elizabeth, who gave birth to great sons when they were old? Would you chose Mary and Joseph, the earthly parents of Jesus who had the task of raising the unique Son of God? Would it be Mary and Martha, women of great faith, but different priorities? Would you choose your ancestors? Maybe I would have chosen my great grandmothers Malinda and Eliza – both slaves who raised their children to be free. Maybe I would choose my grandmothers – Carrie and Laura who taught my parents. May I would have chosen greater educators or religious leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What does the transfiguration event mean for us who seek to embody glimpses of the kingdom of God? What does this passage mean as we cooperate with God's will of love and freedom, peace and justice, wholeness and fullness of life for all? The transfiguration bears witness to the identity of Jesus Christ. The transfiguration bears witness to the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. In the face of suffering, rejection, and death, Jesus was resolute in fulfilling his redemptive mission. He was prayerful and bold as he moved toward his destiny in Jerusalem. As Jesus conversed with Moses and Elijah, our redemptive mission is seen in continuity with the Christian church's Hebrew past as well as with the promised future of all of creation. Moses is a figure that reminds us of the past: the exodus event and the communal responsibility to teach the statutes and ordinances given to Moses at Horeb (Mal. 4:4). Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai, where God appeared to both Moses and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:8-18). Elijah is the prophet who will one day turn people's hearts back to the covenant (Mal. 4:5-6). Both of these

revered leaders talked with Jesus about his "departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (v. 31). **Jeffery L. Tribble Sr.**

When the three disciples finally and fully awoke, they were amazed at the sight before them. Peter, offered to build booths in the tradition of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles for each of them. Then a rebuke came from the clouds: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (v. 35 NIV). When the cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah were gone, Jesus stood alone, as the one who has come to fulfill the law.

The transfiguration of Jesus offers a glimpse of what is possible, not only for Jesus, but for all humanity. The disciples kept what had happened to themselves and told no one (v. 36). So the significance of Jesus' very public healing of the boy with an unclean spirit just after the transfiguration became extremely important. The four left the mountaintop for everyday reality. The glory of God's presence and the pain of a broken world could not and cannot be separated. The detailed description of the man's son underlines his suffering, and the stark statement of the disciples' failure to help (despite the statement in 9:1 that they had been given power to do so) evoked a rare outburst of frustration and anger from Jesus (v. 41). When Jesus accomplished what the disciples have been unable to do, the obedience of the "demon" said to have caused the boy's suffering echoed from below the endorsement of Jesus by the voice from the cloud.

The crowd was described as "astounded at the greatness of God" (v. 43a). They got it right! God was present in and working through Jesus—Chosen and Anointed (Messiah)—to whom we must listen. **Sharon H. Ringe**

Heidi Neumark uses these verses as she tells a powerful story of transfiguration. In her memoir *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* she details the transformation of the church she served for almost twenty years. Aptly named Transfiguration Lutheran Church, the community was struggling, barely surviving,

when she arrived. Standing amid poverty and the myriad problems that can accompany such a demon—crime, drug abuse, lack of education and opportunity, lack of hope—Transfiguration mostly kept its doors shut tight to the world around it.

The work of Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit was an example for Neumark. "When Peter and the others came down from the mountain," she writes, "they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty. But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others."

The transfigured Jesus was changed, not in essence, but in the way he was seen; he acted in and for the world accordingly. Seeing Jesus differently means seeing ourselves and others differently too. The congregation at Transfiguration Church understood: "But living high up isn't the point of transfiguration...[It was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level." **Lori Brandt Hale**

Raphael's exquisite painting *The Transfiguration* presents a chaotic scene at the bottom of the canvas. Stuck at the foot of the mountain, the disciples cannot cure the sick boy. Frustration is palpable in the outstretched arms and panicked faces of the crowd. In their midst, however, two figures point in the direction of the mountain, toward the sky, in which the transfigured Jesus shines, arrayed in white. This is the Jesus who will come down the mountain, bringing life and healing to the boy.

Jesus is the savior not only of this young boy, but of the whole world. Yet it is often tempting to imagine that our world is beyond saving. Disaster persists. Brokenness, sin, and injustice threaten human life. Hope wanes even among faithful people. We need to remember the God who is at work transfiguring the creation now marked by suffering and death. Shown in glory with Moses and Elijah, two great figures of Israel's past, Jesus is revealed as the culmination of the story of a God who comes, again and again, to rescue God's people. Through the gifts of worship and sacraments, prayer and fellowship, service and work for justice and peace, the cloud of Jesus' glory envelops weary disciples. Here shines the one in whom there is power to overcome death. Good news! **Kimberly Miller Van Driel**

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