

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “The Transfiguration” (Luke 9:28-36)**

**February 14, 2010**

Happy Valentine’s Day ☺. Each year Steph and I go to the movies on Valentine’s Day to see a romantic comedy. Many romantic comedies follow a pattern in which a man and woman meet and fall in love or deny the fact that they are falling in love, then obstacles of various kinds get in the way that keep them apart. Usually one ends up realizing that he or she really loves the other and makes a grand gesture of love that results in the couple reuniting. There are many funny moments along the way, and ultimately, of course, there is a happy ending.

Hollywood did not invent the idea of a romantic comedy, for we can go back to Shakespeare--think *Much Ado About Nothing*—and even some of the comedies of the ancient Greeks. While often predictable and silly, romantic comedies still have a way of resonating with us because deep down all of us really want to be loved, deep down all of us hope for a happy ending.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany and so our Gospel lesson is the transfiguration, when Jesus ascends a mountain with Peter, James and John and is transfigured before them. The disciples get a glimpse of Jesus’ glory, Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah, and God the Father speaks out of a cloud. The transfiguration is a turning point in the earthly ministry of Jesus, and foreshadows to the turning point of all of human history, Jesus’ death on the cross.

Jesus ascended a mountain with three disciples—Peter, James, and John—in order to pray. Luke tells us that while Jesus was praying “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” In other words, Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of Jesus’ glory. Years ago when I lived in Wyoming I led a group of high school students on a mission trip to Alaska. During one of our free days we drove to Denali National Park and took a bus from the visitor center to the closest point you could get to Mt. McKinley by vehicle, and we were still many miles away. At 20,322 feet Mt. McKinley, as you may know, is the highest peak in North America. It is so massive it has its own weather system and most of the time it is covered by clouds and you cannot actually see it. When we arrived at the stopping point and stepped off the bus, sure enough, Mt. McKinley was covered by clouds. However, about half an hour later a gap appeared in the clouds and slowly moved from left to right across Mt. McKinley, so that all of us were able to catch a moving glimpse. It was so spectacular it left everyone speechless, even a bunch of wound up high school students. All of us were completely blown away by the glory of Mt. McKinley.

At the transfiguration Peter, James, and John caught a small glimpse of the glory of Jesus as the Son of God, a glimpse of the glory of Jesus that would be revealed in his resurrection and ascension, the glory of Jesus that all will see at his Second Coming--and I suspect they were blown away. Then Luke continues, “Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to

(Jesus).” Moses and Elijah, of course, are two of the main characters of the entire Old Testament.

Moses, who had grown up as an adopted son of pharaoh and therefore had received the best education imaginable, had fled Egypt because he killed a fellow Hebrew in a fight. He eventually found himself in the wilderness working as a shepherd for his father-in-law (probably not the career path he had originally envisioned for himself). God called and enabled Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt after four centuries of slavery (Exodus 3:1-12). God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20ff) and under Moses’ leadership Israel survived in the wilderness for forty years. Scripture tells us that “Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).

Elijah was one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He served in the northern kingdom of Israel after it had split with the southern kingdom of Judah. During his ministry the kings of Israel were exceedingly wicked. It was an extremely dark period of Israel’s history, with rampant immorality and idolatry, including child sacrifice to pagan gods. And yet God did not give up on Israel, but sent Elijah to call Israel to repentance and did many miracles through him—including healing a widow’s only son (I Kings 17:17-24), consuming the sacrifice in the conflict with 450 prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:20-40), enabling him to survive for 40 days and forty nights on food provided by an angel (I Kings 19:8), and taking him to heaven in a chariot of fire (II Kings 2:1-12).

In his summary of the law (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) Jesus proclaimed, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). In the transfiguration Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. All the requirements of the law and all the calls to repentance of the prophets are personified in Moses and Elijah. The entire Old Testament points to the One with whom Moses and Elijah are talking and the event about which they are talking: Jesus’ “departure.”

The Greek word Luke uses for “departure” here is *exodus*, and looks back to the greatest act of redemption of the Old Testament, the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Moses and Elijah are discussing with Jesus his “departure” or exodus “which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”—in other words, Jesus’ impending death and resurrection. And as two of our parishioners, Lyn and Brent Gunsalus, pointed out to me last year, although Moses never got to actually enter the Promised Land, he eventually appeared with Jesus at the transfiguration. Moreover, although Elijah never saw Israel repent in spite of all the preaching and miracles, for Israel was brutally conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., he too eventually appeared with Jesus at the transfiguration.

As Moses and Elijah were leaving, Peter speaks up, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Luke notes that Peter did not know what he was saying. Have you ever spoken without knowing what you were saying? In the spirit of Valentine’s Day I’ll share an embarrassing but true time I did that. As a sophomore in college, I was smitten by a girl in a science class (this was before I was even more smitten by a blonde from North Carolina whom I later married). I wanted to ask her out but didn’t know what to say, so, not knowing what I was saying, I asked her, “Are you a bowler?” She had a puzzled look on her face, “What?” “Are you a bowler,” I repeated. “Do you bowl, you know, bowling balls?” I was beat red at this point--this was certainly not going well. She shook her head, “I don’t know what you’re saying.” “Would you like to go bowling sometime?” I stammered. “No.” she said as she rolled her eyes. That was that. I’ll never forget walking back to the dorm after that class feeling like Chris Farley—“I’m so stupid, I’m so stupid” ☺.

Peter had no clue what he was saying as he saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, but it didn’t matter because while he was talking “a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified and entered the cloud.” At that point God the Father spoke, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” At the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry God the father had declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). And now toward the end of his earthly ministry God the Father again identifies Jesus as God the Son, and commands Peter, James, and John, “Listen to him!” This actually fulfills a prophecy given to Moses in Deuteronomy in which he states, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

After God the Father had spoken “Jesus was found alone.” Peter apparently learned his lesson because he, along with James and John “kept silent and... told no one of any of the things they had seen.”

The transfiguration points to the departure, the exodus of Jesus that was to be accomplished at Jerusalem. The transfiguration also points beyond that to the resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus. The transfiguration is not a myth or nifty story; it really happened. In fact, as an elderly man, perhaps soon before his being martyred by being crucified upside down, Peter wrote his second letter in which he recalls the transfiguration:

“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Not too long after the transfiguration Jesus indeed entered Jerusalem, and later that week he ascended a different mountain, the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-46) to the Garden of Gethsemane. Again Jesus went to pray, again Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John (Mark 14:32-33), and again the disciples were weighed down with sleep.

This time there was no transfiguration. This time there was no appearance of Moses and Elijah. This time there was no cloud, no speaking by God the Father. The time for Jesus' departure had come, for after this Jesus was arrested, tried, mocked, beaten, and nailed to a cross. In his departure, in his exodus Jesus made it possible for the whole world to be delivered from sin and death. But it doesn't end there, for Jesus was raised on the third day and forty days later ascended to heaven and as we say in the Apostles Creed, "From thence he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead." And when Jesus returns, all will catch much more than a glimpse of his glory.

And it doesn't end there, for the glory of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus transforms us as well, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:18).

Moreover, there is a future hope of glory that we have in Christ to which Paul alludes in his Letter to the Romans, a letter written to Christians in the midst of brutal persecution under the Roman emperor Nero, persecution that often included torture, imprisonment and death: "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (8:18). That gives us hope and encouragement in the midst of sufferings in our lives right now—hope and encouragement in the midst of illnesses, financial setbacks, dysfunctional family dynamics, addictions, all of it.

Going back to romantic comedies for a moment... the reason romantic comedies resonate with us is that we all long to be really loved, we all long for a happy ending. The good news of the gospel is that God indeed really loves us, that God took the initiative with the grand gesture of becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, dying on the cross for the sins of the world, and rising from the dead to give us the hope of eternal life. The good news of the gospel is that there will be a happy ending for all of us in Jesus Christ, a happy ending that includes the glory of God, a happy ending that in fact never ends. In the meantime we long to experience what Peter, James and John did at the transfiguration, we long to catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

In his book, *The Weight of Glory* C. S. Lewis describes this longing:

"Our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no

mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honor beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache... At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door... But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get *in*."

The transfiguration was a turning point in the earthly ministry of Jesus and pointed to the greatest turning point of history, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps today as we remember the transfiguration the love of God can create a turning point in your life as well, for one day we too, like Peter, James and John, will all see the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

In the meantime on this Valentine's Day we can be encouraged, because the transfiguration points us to the heart of the gospel, that God in Christ indeed loves us more than we could imagine, and that in him there is indeed a happy ending.

Let us pray...