

Transfiguration C 2022 Luke 9:28-36

This weekend I took Otto to Snow Camp at Sequanota, which is his very favorite place. I'm not sure that he could make it there on his own, like in that movie where the two dogs and the cat walk across Canada, because he usually sleeps in the backseat for most of the drive, but he always wakes up when we're getting close and he gets very excited. I think he has memorized the landmarks on the way to a number of the places he enjoys: the last stop sign on the way to camp; the turn off of 22 to Canoe Creek; the Dunkin' Donuts drive thru. I appreciate that because I, too, navigate by landmarks better than I remember street names or route numbers. The gospel writers and the church that reads their stories also navigate by landmarks: Jesus' journey and our own liturgical practice make more sense when we pay attention to the signposts along the way.

The Transfiguration is a turning point in Jesus' life and ministry, which is why we celebrate it as a kind of transition of seasons in our church year. At Epiphany we celebrate a supernatural light, the star that led the magi; then at the Transfiguration Jesus is again illuminated in a kind of dazzling, other-worldly glory that points the disciples toward Jesus, helping them to identify him, as the voice from the cloud proclaims: *My Son, My Chosen*. There's a lot more that happens in Jesus' life between those two events, even some miraculous things, but in the church we think of these past few weeks as "ordinary" time—day to day life in between these illuminating, revelatory experiences.

The Transfiguration marks the end of the season after Epiphany and prepares us for Lent. Again, Luke gives us bookends to chapters in Jesus' life, this time by setting the scenes on mountains. Jesus goes up this mountain to pray, bringing a sleepy Peter, John, and James with him, where he is transfigured before them with two famous men, Moses and Elijah. Seven weeks from now we'll find Peter, James, and John, this time too tired to stay awake, as Jesus is led up another mountain to be crucified between two criminals. Between now and then, we'll read about Jesus coming back down the mountain to attend to his every day work—which granted includes exorcising demons and miraculously healing people—but is also a steady, measured labor that takes him to the cross.

Luke is the only gospel writer who lets us in on the subject of the discussion between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah: Jesus' departure, which he will accomplish at Jerusalem. We might think of the departure Moses led, acting as God's instrument to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We read earlier about Moses' own transfiguration, when he would scare the Israelites because his face would shine after having been in the presence of God. Elijah's departure is

unique in that he didn't die but was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot; therefore the people always expected him to return. Yet I wonder if the reason he is here is not because of that dramatic scene but because Elijah lost heart and more or less begged to retire, only continuing God's work until Elisha could be appointed as his successor. In comparison, the buck stops with Jesus; he'll see his life's work through to the end, even though it will take him to the cross.

Peter expresses the sentiment that many of us have when we experience what we—usually metaphorically—call mountaintop experiences: *It is good for us to be here; let's set up camp so we can stay indefinitely.* Luke explains that Peter doesn't really know what he's saying, but Peter can clearly see that something fantastic is happening, and he doesn't want that to end. Since we know the next chapters of the story, we can see even better than Peter himself why he would want to stay on the Mount of Transfiguration rather than follow Jesus to Mount Calvary. It's not a coincidence that these disciples, who, even though they are tired, managed to stay awake for the laser show of Israel's greatest historic figures, all fell asleep when Jesus was praying in the garden. Peter insists that it's good for them to be with Jesus when he is shining in glory, but Peter stays at a distance and even denies knowing Jesus after his arrest. This is the mountain where Peter wants to be, but Calvary is the mountain where Jesus is headed.

In the church we pay special attention to these big revelations and mountain top events. But they don't exist for themselves or in a vacuum. They are the signs, the landmarks, that help us to find our way, not for us to park ourselves in one place, but to keep going. It *is* good for us to be on those mountain tops sometimes, but Jesus spends much more time walking on the plains. What makes this a good place to be, as Peter says, is not the mountain but the presence of the Lord. We get the bright and shining days where God's presence is more obvious to us to energize us for the rather ordinary hike ahead, and the hiking we do on the plain builds up our strength for the days when following Jesus requires the steep descent into darker, more foreboding valleys. The Lenten season into which we're about to walk has traditionally be a time of increased spiritual practice to help us better follow Jesus' call to godly living—building faith in the same way that I'd build muscle if I ever took those free weights out of the closet.

The Lenten journey is not our journey but Jesus' journey. We can't go up the mountain to the cross as he did; if we could, he wouldn't have had to. Yet following Jesus' call takes us through all other sorts of terrain, including to places we wouldn't choose to go ourselves. The strength we need to get us there doesn't come from staying on the mountain but from staying in relationship with God, who loved us from the heights of the mountain to the depths of hell and back again. God's Son, the Chosen, is calling us to stick with him. May we listen.