

“God works in surprising ways – a new way forward”

2 Corinthians 3:12-18; Luke 9:28-36 (February 27, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

I want to begin by saying that I’m sorry that I can’t be with you today, at least in person. But I hope this video will be the next best thing. It seems this pandemic is making us all innovate in ways we hadn’t imagined. It’s turning preachers into film-makers! Which certainly stretches my skill-set.

Many of you will have heard by now that earlier this week I tested positive for Covid, despite trying to be careful around others. The good news is that I’m on the road to recovery.

I want to assure you that the Worship Commission will continue to monitor the situation with a view to easing our guidelines, but only as we feel it safe to do so.



Our Gospel reading today is the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. He takes three disciples up on a mountain to pray. And as he’s praying his appearance is amazingly transformed. His face is altered, and his clothes become dazzling white.



Like snow on those clear, crisp, winter days when the sky is blue – like we had earlier this week. The sun has such strength in it now. The daylight comes earlier, and stays later. And if you go out in the middle of the afternoon, you might have to put on your sunglasses to shield your eyes from the brightness that’s reflected all around. It’s beautiful, but almost blinding.

The disciples are half-asleep as Jesus prays, and only notice the glaring light when they crack open their eyes to find Jesus, together with Moses and Elijah. They behold the brightness of his glory.

We are so transfixed by this, so mesmerized by the amazing scene that unfolds in front of us, that we easily miss the significance of what is happening. Our eyes may be dazzled, while our ears are shut. We see the glory but fail to understand what it means for our lives.

So what *does* it mean?



Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. And what an epiphany *this* is! What a startling revelation! Jesus shines with the glory of his heavenly father. Like a star that has gone super-nova. Or rather – like the shekinah, the glorious divine presence that comes to dwell in the temple, where the reality of God is made manifest to the world.

In re-telling the story of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, we are drawn toward that glory. Like insects to a light bulb left on at dusk on a summer night. We want to be there. And like Peter, James and John, we’d like to build our booths and try to hold on to the experience, so we can remain in that holy place.



But what if there is more to this story than the vision? I wonder, what was it that Jesus, Moses and Elijah were saying to one another? What could they possibly be talking *about*? Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall next to that conversation?

Well, today is our lucky day, because Luke actually tells us. He's the only Gospel writer to do so. He says that Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus about his *departure*. They were talking about Jesus' leaving.

Now this is a turning point in the gospel story. Just as it's a turning point in the seasons of the church. Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, and next week will be the first Sunday in Lent.

So also, in the Gospel of Luke this transfiguration story marks a turning point in Jesus' life and ministry. Peter has just named Jesus the Messiah. But this Messiah will be a suffering one, rejected by religious leaders, soon to be killed.

And that is what Luke is hinting at here. Two of the greatest figures in the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets are standing with Jesus, basking in his glory. And they're talking about his departure. The way he will leave this earth. The way it will be "accomplished."

Now let's pause *there* for a moment. Isn't that a strange way to talk about a person's leaving? To call it an *accomplishment*? When I want to leave I usually just get up and walk out the door. It's pretty easy, not what I would call a great triumph or success.

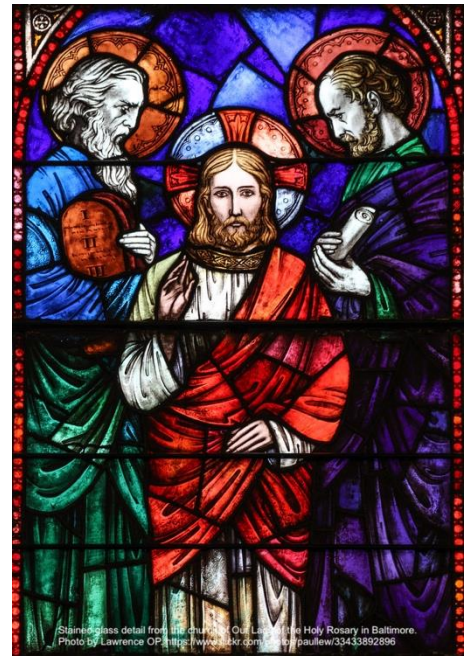
But Jesus' leaving will be different. It will be difficult, hard to get through. Because *his* leaving will be accomplished through suffering and death on a cross.



And there's another, very important, thing I want to point out about this passage. It's the word that's used for Jesus' *departure*. It matters because it's an unusual word to use, and it's one that's packed with theological significance.

Luke says that Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus about his "exodon" which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. Now, where have you heard that word before? In English, the word is *exodus*. And I'm sure you're familiar with that! How could we miss it?

The exodus may well be the most important event in the history of the Hebrew people. It's what gave them their identity as people saved by God, freed from the suffering imposed by harsh Egyptian taskmasters. Saved through the parted waters of the sea. Led through the wilderness, given food and drink by the hand of God. And then, finally,



reaching the end of the journey, gifted with a promised land – a good land long anticipated, a land flowing with milk and honey.



Exodus from Egypt. Origin: Amsterdam. Date: 1712. Caspar Luyken, print maker, Noord-Nederlands (1672–1708), Rijksmuseum, Public Domain Dedication.

You know that Exodus story, don't you? It's an archetypal one. By which I mean it's a story that's almost larger than life, a story that we continue to tell here, in the community of faith, over and over again. It's a story that shows us who God is – a God of freedom and liberation, a God of compassion and care. And it's a story that tells us who we are – a people loved by God, saved by grace, gifted with God's salvation.

And now, says Luke, this saving God is on the move. Instigating a "new exodus," a new path to freedom. Just as Moses led a people long ago, so now Jesus will lead these disciples, indeed all humanity, to a new

and better place.

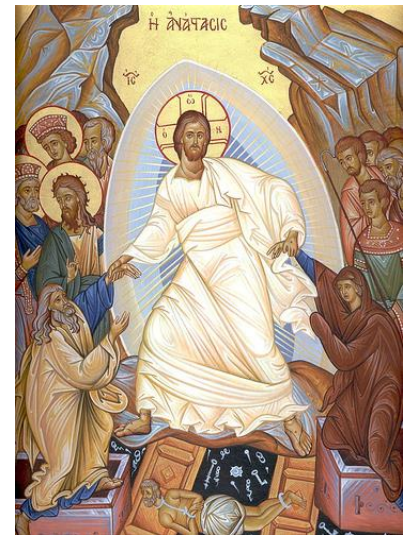


Can it be true? Well, have a look at this depiction of Jesus and what he accomplished through his death and resurrection.

This is an Easter icon, a religious image common in Eastern Orthodox churches. In the image, can you see what is happening? First of all there is the risen Christ, who takes front and centre stage. Under his feet is darkness representing sin and death.

And look who Jesus has in each of his hands. It's Adam on one side, and Eve on the other. Jesus is pulling them up. It seems as though their feet are stuck in a coffin. But not to worry. Death has no more grip on them! Christ has risen. And here he takes Adam and Eve out from the grave and into a bright new world.

And *this*, Jesus does for all of us. Frees us from bondage to old death-dealing ways. Leads us out of our darkness into the light. Takes us from wherever we are and points us toward a better place to be.



Do we need a new way forward? I've been asking myself that very question these past few weeks. As I've watched the cumulative effects of a lingering pandemic, the divisions that have risen, the harsh rhetoric. As one person said to me not long ago, I can hardly recognize this country any more.

And now with the events of this week, threats of invasion now realized, armies on the march, bombs exploding in the city, people fleeing for safety but wondering where to find it. Maybe you'd thought we'd left that behind kind of thing. But no, it's very much alive.

Power-plays and war-mongering, bullying, intimidation, self-interest and greed – the usual sin and death stuff writ large on the geo-political landscape. “Deliver us from evil,” we pray. This is not a place we want to be.



But how do we escape? What is the way *forward*? *Can* we move to a better place?

The Gospel says “yes.” By his death and resurrection, Jesus opens a way for us. A way that includes hope, forgiveness, healing, new beginnings. Jesus brings us to a kingdom where sin no longer reigns supreme. Where peace and God’s shalom are solidly rooted, able to resist the incursions of injustice, power plays and territorial grabs.

Jesus promises a new world, a new humanity. Lord knows we need it!

He takes our hands and pulls us up. Lifts us out of the quicksand we’re stuck in. Takes us through this sea of chaos that swirls around us. Leads us into a *new* way of being. Shows us a world full of God’s glory. A world where that light shines spectacularly, not only in Jesus, but in *all* of us!



And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord ... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another;

In this morning’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we read these remarkable words: “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord ... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another ...”

That means the transfiguration story is not just *about* Jesus. It’s also about *us*. It’s about the grace of God working in our lives, so that we too shine with the glory of God.

When we love our neighbours as ourselves. When we forgive as we have been forgiven. When we work to build peaceable communities in our churches and neighbourhoods. When we seek to serve more than to be served. When we love the Lord with all our heart, mind, strength and soul ...

Then *our* lives, both individually and collectively, begin to shine. The glory of God breaks into the world whenever we care for God’s creation and live in Kingdom ways.

“The new heavens and the new earth are not *replacements* for the old ones;” writes Robert Farrar Capon, “they are *transfigurations* of them. The redeemed order is not the created order *forsaken*; it is the created order - all of it - *raised and glorified*.”ⁱ We are raised to new life with Jesus.

Over this Epiphany season we’ve talked about God’s surprising ways. And here’s yet another one: Jesus invites each one of us into a transformed, and absolutely glorious, way of living. Wherever you find yourself today, he offers us a new way forward. May we embrace that life and so glorify our maker! Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/transfiguration>, Accessed Feb. 25, 2022.