

WALKING INTO THE DARK

St Andrew's UC Sudbury; February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration.

Really, what does that *mean*?

A change of form or appearance, the dictionary says.

Yes, but have you ever used that word

except to refer to this Bible story?

Let's face it: transfiguration isn't really part of our everyday vocabulary.

It's a word we save for God-talk—

a strange mysterious word

that Bible writers use to describe Jesus

turning all bright and shining

when he gets together with a couple of very old prophets

on top of a hill.

I'm going to let that word rest for a bit

and introduce another fancy theological word: *theophany*.

What we have here this morning (besides transfiguration) is theophany.

Two theophanies:

one in the OT reading from Exodus

and one from Luke's gospel.

A theophany, to remind us all (including me),
is a revelation of God.

If you experience a theophany,

it means that you encounter the holy in some visible way.

In some way, you *see* the divine, the sacred.

And, if you're there when a theophany happens,

you're standing on holy ground.

Because God is definitely present.

The Bible offers us lots of theophany stories—

Moses and the burning bush is a familiar one for many of us;

and the baptism of Jesus...

have you heard the one about Elijah going up in the fiery chariot?

and the pillars of fire and cloud that led the Hebrews to the promised land?

Many, many theophany stories in our scriptures,

all describing in over-the-top language and imagery

how God enters into our picture, our line of vision.
Think of the Moses story from today's OT scripture...
Moses has been up on the mountain with God,
receiving God's word for the people,
and by the time Moses comes down from the mountaintop
he is glowing so much from his theophany
that he has to cover his face until the shine wears off!

They're hard to accept on rational levels, these theophany stories.
They don't fit our understanding of the laws of nature,
that's for sure.

It's tempting to explain them away somehow,
lest someone suspect us of a foolish literalism.

That rationalization is easily enough done
with the Moses-coming-down-the-mountain story.
After all, we're talking about a time and place fairly remote
from all of us sitting in this 21st century worship space.
We can relegate this OT account to an ancient people
with religious practices and beliefs very different from ours.

But what about this relatively more modern theophany,
the one Luke tells us about?

Still pretty remote, you might say—two thousand years ago.
Yes, but—

this one is a significant part of our Christian story—
this theophany we refer to as the Transfiguration—
even warranting a special Sunday on our liturgical calendar.

Luke places this narrative at a critical point in his gospel account.

In previous chapters

Luke has given an extended infancy narrative
followed by the story of Jesus' ministry and teachings,
both in Galilee and in gentile territory.

But now comes a shift:

Jesus changes the subject in drastic ways.

He starts talking end-of-life stuff—

earlier in chapter 9, he's been talking to his disciples
about suffering and dying and rising.

And, later in chapter 9, it becomes more than just words:

Jesus begins, quite literally, to walk the talk.

He turns himself in a new direction

and starts to walk south toward Jerusalem,
where what he's been predicting is going to actually happen.

This story of transfiguration and theophany
is placed quite deliberately at this point of shift—
right after Jesus has told his closest followers that he is going to die
and right before he turns himself in the direction of the cross.

That's where the theophany-transfiguration happens.
Clearly this is a significant moment for Jesus on the journey.

But, in setting the story up this way, Luke is also telling us that this is
a significant moment for the followers of Jesus.
Even if they don't quite get it right away.

Those poor muddled disciples—
James and John and Peter—
they have no idea what they're in for
when they accept Jesus' invitation to go hiking that day.

Jesus has his own plan.

He wants to pray.

Small wonder, that—

he's anxious, his spirit is troubled.

He's been thinking a lot about what lies ahead for him.

Jerusalem is not going to be pretty and Jesus knows it.

But those three comrades trudging beside him—

they aren't in such a fervent prayer space.

Clearly they do not yet realize where this is all going.

By the time they get to the top of the hill,

all they think about is pulling out their water bottles and granola bars,
and flopping to the ground for a break.

And that's what they do.

Then, suddenly, out of who-knows-where—

Jesus bursts into light!

Dazzling, blinding light.

Well, that wakes up those three dozing disciples in a hurry!

Wakes them up from sleep, that is.

They are still—shall we say—somewhat stunned.

James and John are rendered speechless and Peter goes silly.

None of them knows what to make of this—
all this brightness coming from Jesus,
and then—do they really see this? *Moses* and *Elijah*?!
The great Lightbearers of ancient Israel,
talking to this strange beaming shining version of Jesus?

This is holy ground.
In an instant they know it, these three sleepyheads.
This is holy ground. Theophany. God is present.
They may not know what to do with all this holiness—
and clearly they don't, because Peter's first reaction is
to build something to contain all that light,
which would be an exercise in futility—
they don't know what to do but they know God is there.
In Jesus. God is there in Jesus.

Pay attention, says Luke the storyteller.
Pay good attention.
God is in Jesus.
That's what this shining and bedazzlement is all about.
And it happens right here
at this particular place in the story.

Let me share with you what the Bible scholars say about this.
They remind us of the story's location:
hard on the heels of Jesus telling his followers
in clear unequivocal language that he is going to die.
The Way of Life, Jesus insists, is a journey through suffering and death.
(The disciples didn't much like the sound of that last week
when Jesus said it. They were so hoping for a triumphant messiah.)
And now, in the light of Jesus' dazzlingly white transfiguration,
a voice from heaven says, "Listen to him.
Listen to Jesus when he talks about crucifixion and resurrection."

Oh, it's hard to move from the hope of Advent,
the silent-night beauty of Christmas,
the joyous light of Epiphany,
into this darkening holy journey of Lent—
this road to Jerusalem.

It's hard not to have control over the travel plans.
We struggle with that.
We were so hoping for a lovely trip,
 a journey with a clear destination,
 and lots of places along the way to stop and smell the roses.
But that's not what our tradition teaches us.

Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem and begins to walk
 to the place of confrontation with the forces of empire,
 the place of suffering for the sake of justice.
Jesus is preparing to walk into the dark.
Surely he needs this moment on the mountain to give him strength.
He needs to be reassured
 that he is not alone on this journey—
that the strength of tradition and the witness of the faithful
 will gird him up...
that holy Presence will pour into him and carry him through
 the brokenness of body and soul that lies ahead...
that, no matter what happens, he is still beloved of God,
 called, and empowered to fulfill that calling....

Thank God for the theophanies.
Thank God for the holy places we pass through
 because without them we would not have strength to travel.
Thank God for those moments at the font
 when we know with absolute certainty
 that God calls us, each one, and names us beloved.
Thank God for those gatherings around the Table,
 where we are nourished and refreshed in communion with the holy.
Thank God for those moments of sharing with each other
 in conversation, in sorrow, in laughter, in dreaming,
 in storytelling, in hope and in despair—
 those precious times of knowing we are not alone.
Thank God.

The walk of faith is not for the fainthearted.
It means placing our trust in a God we cannot physically see
 or touch or describe.
It means letting mystery be mystery.
It means being willing to follow in the footsteps

of One who insists on walking toward places of death.
It means traveling with companions we do not get to choose for ourselves.
It means putting ourselves last and others first.
It means washing someone's smelly feet and sharing our last loaf of bread.
It means offering *ourselves* as holy ground
so that others may see the Presence of the Holy One.
In *our* transfiguration.

Amen.