

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

The Feast of the Transfiguration – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

ACNA Readings – Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36

Introduction. The Transfiguration is a familiar story to many of us. It occurs in all three of the Synoptic Gospels without much variation. It is so important that it is celebrated twice in the liturgical calendar, with the primary feast day being the 6 August and the other being the Sunday before Lent. Normally I'd say that *geography is theology* – that is that place and location matter to the narrative and add nuance and insight to the message of the story. But in this case, we actually do not know for certain where this event took place.

Common Theme. There are several themes to consider in the texts this week. Themes of light, glory, transformation, and reflecting the presence of God. The transformation is not only of Jesus but also of the disciples and of ourselves. And perhaps most importantly the hearing of the voice of God and the effect that voice should have on our lives.

Exodus 34:29-35. Moses had been in close communion with the Lord for 40 days and nights. During that time, verse 28 says that Moses had fasted – neither eating nor drinking. Humanly speaking he is medically in need of food, however, the presence of God had an effect on Moses. It sustained him physically and marked him with a radiant glow.

The Hebrew word to describe the shine of Moses' face is קָרַן *karan* which has the same consonants as *keren*, the Hebrew word for horn. This unfortunately led some Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate translations to read that Moses had horns. Michelangelo's famous statue of Moses in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, has Moses with horns as his work was based on the Vulgate text of Exodus 34.

Habakkuk 3:4 has this word used in the context of light and translates the same word קָרַן *karan* as 'rays', which I think hints at the effect that the presence of God has had on Moses. God's light has somehow been absorbed and reflected by the skin of Moses. The glow was noticeable to the Israelites and made them fearful and uncomfortable, so they requested Moses to cover his skin.

Psalm 99. Psalm 99 is untitled, unattributed, and a powerful declaration of the kingship of God. God is proclaimed as a king and he reigns over Zion and the nations. In a reference to the Tabernacle, God is enthroned between the Cherubim who stood over the Ark of the Covenant.

The kingship of God has an effect on the people – as the Lord reigns the people tremble. A protestant movement known as the Quakers would often quiver and shake during worship while under the power of the Holy Spirit. A stream of Orthodox Judaism is known as the *Haredim*, which means *those that tremble*. The shared concept is that there is a human reaction to the divine presence.

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Psalm 99 also presents God as holy (vv. 3&5), and that he is present in the community (vv. 6&7). His goodness is revealed in the mighty King who also loves justice and has done what is right and just. God's goodness is therefore seen through his deeds. The final verses remind us that the Lord is a forgiving God. The psalmist concludes that the appropriate response for those who have seen the just, righteous, good, and holy deeds of the Lord is exaltation and worship. We worship God because we have seen his mighty deeds and know what he has done for us.

2 Peter 1:13-21. Peter appears to be referencing his experience at the transfiguration. At the time of the transfiguration, Peter wanted to erect tents for Jesus and his mysterious visitors. Here he describes his earthly body as no more than a tent, from which he is soon to depart. Peter is writing to people who have faith in the Lord, so what does he want to tell them? He wants to tell them what he has seen!

Peter was a witness of something amazing and after Peter had departed this world he hopes his hearers will remember these things. Peter's argument is simple: the stories of Jesus are not myths and legends; they are attested to be true through eyewitness accounts, of which Peter himself is one. Peter saw the majesty and glory of the transfigured Messiah, and he heard the voice from heaven.

Hearing is not a passive action; it requires a response. The disciples heard Jesus, and they heard God the Father. Since the ascension, they have been proclaiming the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven. The listeners of Peter's epistle are being reminded that the prophetic message of the Scriptures is true and can be trusted.

The same Spirit that moved the prophets also moved in Jesus and now moves the people of God. As the apostles depart this world and a dark persecution arises, the community of believers must hold on to the light – the hope and vision of the prophets which is reflected in the glory of a risen Jesus.

Luke 9:28-36. The Gospels are finely crafted texts and while they are not chronological, the order in which the stories appear is a divine narrative. In all three of the Synoptics, the transfiguration always comes after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. In context, the ministry of Jesus is going well. He has gathered his disciples; he is becoming popular with the crowds; he is teaching, healing, and challenging the status quo.

Perhaps, unexpectedly, then Jesus takes a small group of his disciples, the triumvirate of Peter, James, and John and privately goes up a mountain. The three disciples were some of the first to have been called by Jesus. Only those three were given the honour of witnessing the raising of Jarius' daughter; now here they witness the transfiguration and later they will be present at the agony in the Garden.

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The location of the mountain is disputed. One tradition puts this event on Mt Tavor bordering the territory of Issachar and Zebulon. This was the biblical site of the battle between Judge Barak and Sisera. Another more likely place would be Mt Hermon in the Golan – known as biblical Bashan. The scene is quite reminiscent of the Exodus and Mt Sinai. There is a mountain, a cloud, lightning and a voice from heaven. As Jesus is transformed Moses and Elijah appear and they discuss with Jesus his ἔξοδος *exodus* (v. 31) – often translated as departure.

The Church Father Origen, who loved allegory, says Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Since Origen, that is the way the majority of commentators relate to their appearance in the story. However, Moses is also a prophet and Elijah does not write a prophetic book. Isaiah is actually the largest prophetic book containing the majority of messianic promises, and Elisha gains a double portion of Elijah's power and performs twice as many miracles. I think Origen's allegory is perhaps flawed.

Moses and Elijah both have roles to play in the messianic kingdom. One like Moses is coming (Deut 18) and Elijah is the forerunner of Messiah (Mal 4). Something eschatological is occurring. Peter has already confessed Jesus to be the Messiah and now Moses and Elijah have confirmed Jesus' messianic identity. God has intervened again in human affairs and his light is about to defeat the darkness once more.

Jesus hears the voice from heaven on two occasions, his Baptism and his Transfiguration. The rabbinic world defines a voice from heaven as the *Bat Kol* – literally *daughter of the voice* – and it refers to the supernatural way in which God communicates to his creation after the time of the prophets had ended.

In the Hebrew Bible – Old Testament – God has a lot to say and speaks regularly. After the destruction of the Temples, the voice of God was not heard as often or with such clarity. Early rabbinic Judaism taught that God continued to participate in his creation through the *Shekhina* and that a *Bat Kol* would go forth from Mount Sinai every day (Pirke Avot 6:2).

In the Middle Ages, it was taught that the Hasidim – that is the devout pious people – would be able to hear the *Bat Kol* on regular occasions. The point is that in the background of the New Testament; there was a strong tradition and belief that God still spoke to his people. The way God speaks here is very interesting. At the time of Jesus, the canon was not completely decided; however, they had arranged the Scriptures into three groupings: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms.

In one sentence, God combines words from each of those groupings. 'This is my Son' comes from Psalm 2, 'Whom I love' comes from Isaiah 42 and 'Listen to Him' comes from Deuteronomy 18. The voice from the cloud speaks to the disciples and commands them to listen to Jesus. The verb *to hear* is also the Biblical Hebrew word for *to obey*. You can only obey what you hear and cannot obey things you

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have not yet heard. And so, it is important to listen and to listen to the right voice. Our culture has many voices and mostly not good ones. The voice of God is powerful, redemptive, creative, and holy.

Walking by faith is walking by listening; he who has ears let him hear. We should then make every effort to hear the voice of heaven. How does Jesus do that? By praying and by reading the Scriptures! By fellowship with the saints so we can hear the voice of God speaking through each other. In doing so, we too can be transformed into more of the likeness of Christ and we can reflect that glory and light to a dark world that sorely needs it.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.