

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 9:28-36

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The transfiguration of Jesus follows the passion predictions in the Gospels. Its impact is always to set the passion and the prophecy of Jesus' passion in the context of glory. This is most fully developed in John where the theme of manifesting his glory recurs throughout the whole gospel. The focus of that glory is certainly the resurrection but it is also the crucifixion and, as is clear later in the story, of Jesus' ascension. The theme in this story is that Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus about his departure.

Jesus' departure is first of all his departure from Galilee on his journey to Jerusalem, which begins in Luke's story very shortly after this transfiguration narrative (Luke 9:51). Secondly, "departure" also refers to his crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, which is the end of Luke's story in the Gospel. "His departure" refers to all of those elements: Jesus' departure from Galilee, his departure from the world through death, his departure to heaven in the ascension.

In the background of this story is Mt. Sinai and the transfiguration of Moses (Exodus 35:29-35). Moses' face shone because he had been talking with God. There is also an illusion in the story to Elijah's departure into heaven described in 2 Kings, where Elijah is taken up in a fiery chariot. These stories of the great prophets of Israel are a part of the background against which the story of Jesus is told.

This is a highly dynamic story, full of surprises. Jesus' transfiguration is a surprise, as is the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the disciples nearly asleep but managing to stay awake and Peter's bumbling response offering to build three booths, the cloud and the disciples' terror in entering it, the voice of God, Jesus being there alone. This story is full of moments of wonder and surprise which you want to emphasize in its telling.

The voice of God is heard in this story for the first time since the baptism. Part of what this story communicates is that Jesus is the Messiah. But also that he is more than the Messiah. He is God's son. He is the one who will make God present.

The story begins with Jesus taking a select group of disciples up on the mountain where he was praying. As he was praying, he was transfigured. The implication is that he was transfigured by the presence of God on the mountain.

That in turn elicits the memories of Moses being on the mountain talking with God, and of his face shining. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared. These are "luminaries"—people through whom God's light shone and from whom God's light emanates. Jesus appeared in glory and they were talking, these three heroes of Israel, about his departure. Moses and Elijah had each had memorable departures, Moses at the mountain

overlooking the promised land, and Elijah in a flaming chariot. They could talk about departures and were apparently helping Jesus plan his.

Peter's offer to make three booths, one for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah, comes after they are weighed down with sleep but had managed to stay awake. This is a distinctive Lukan motif in the transfiguration stories. It anticipates Gethsemane where the same disciples are with Jesus and their eyes are also weighed down.

In the case of the Gethsemane story, there is a very clear reason why the disciples are sleepy: they had just consumed the biggest meal of the year, including a lot of wine. In the Passover meal, five cups of wine were mandatory. And that was only the *beginning* of the wine that would be drunk on this festive occasion. So they had good reason to be sleepy on Passover night.

There's no apparent reason why the disciples' eyes would be weighed down in the transfiguration story, except that they are in the presence of God. In contrast to their failure to stay awake in Gethsemane, in this case they managed to do so. It may be that staying awake is a sign of response to divine testing, but this is unspecified in the story.

Peter's offer to build booths is reminiscent of the festival of booths which was probably the most joyous festival of the year in Israel. His offer to build three booths is probably told as a kind of bumbling fool statement, with a note of humor, which Luke then explains: Peter "didn't know what to say." It's part of the characterization of Peter as an everyman kind of character who would be intimidated by the presence of these three great men and really wouldn't know what to say. That's something all of us can identify with. In telling the story, you want to create that atmosphere with Peter. Any way you can find to speak his line with some hesitation, nervousness and dumbness is fully appropriate here.

The cloud is reminiscent of Exodus and of Moses on the mountain where the cloud came down on the mountain and Moses walked into it. The disciples are terrified walking into the cloud—an appropriate response to entering into the unknown of the presence of the holy one. That feeling is explicitly described in Daniel 10:7-8 where Daniel sees a vision of a divine figure and describes in detail his fearful response to it. That might be a place to find some analogy to what is being described in the transfiguration story that would give you a sense of how to tell it.

The voice from the cloud is the voice of God. The storytelling decision is whether this voice is big and loud or whether it is soft. It's probably not as soft as the voice heard by Elijah at Mt. Horeb in the cave where it seems to be that God is whispering into Elijah's ear. Here it's more of a pronouncement that the disciples are expected to hear, so it is not whispered into their ears. But it is not the great voice that makes the earth shake. It is a gentle and quiet voice of God: "This is my son."

The Greek word here—"Eklelegmenos"—means "called out." Jesus is called out by God. When the disciples come out of the cloud, they see only Jesus. The implication is that now one greater than Moses and Elijah has taken their place. It is a moment of quiet; it is a moment of awe at this extraordinary revelation of Jesus' identity.

The points of connection with this story are experiences of holiness we have had and also experiences like those of Peter and James and John of being either intimidated or of feeling unworthy in the presence of God.