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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
Feast of the Transfiguration – August 6, 2017
Exodus 34:29-35 & Luke 9:28-36

In the Episcopal Church, we don't pick the scripture lessons we will read. I can't, for instance, decide to do a sermon series on "The 12 Steps to Glory" and hand-pick the bible passages to be read each week that will perfectly illustrate the points I want to make. In our Church, we go about it the other way around. We preachers start with the scripture lessons that have been assigned for that day and then discern what the Holy Spirit's revealing at that time through those passages.

Along with most of the mainline Protestant churches, The Episcopal Church follows what is called the Revised Common Lectionary. This lectionary is a planned collection and order of readings from holy scripture that is organized to correspond to the liturgical year with its pattern of feasts and seasons. Most liturgical churches followed their own lectionaries but in the early-to-mid '90's, the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary was commonly adopted. For each Sunday, passages have been selected from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament, and from one of the four Gospels. The lectionary runs in three-year cycles, with each year focusing predominantly on one of the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), with lessons from John's gospel threaded throughout. You might have seen the letters A, B, or C listed after the liturgical day printed on a leaflet from the Church – that letter corresponds to the lectionary cycle year. So, if you've heard someone ask, "what year are we in?" you likely would have heard a response like, "year B" or "Mark".

We are currently in lectionary year A and most of our lessons this liturgical year (and especially during this summer) have been from Matthew's gospel. Over the past few weeks, we've been hearing Jesus' teachings on faith and the kingdom of heaven, as well as parables about seed, sowers, and hidden treasure. We have been doing a deep-dive into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven: how it is threaded throughout creation; how it is often found in surprising places; and how we should rejoice upon finding its hidden presence and do all that we can to possess it fully.

Jesus taught his disciples and other followers that God's love and presence in the world is pervasive... all that we need to do is to open our eyes and our ears to find it. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened for you," Jesus teaches in his sermon on the mount, "for everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matt 7:7-8).

Just last Sunday, Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or a small amount of yeast mixed in flour – ordinary and easily overlooked but surprising and mighty in its potential to transform. He taught that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field that, when discovered, is treasured above all other possessions. And that the kingdom of heaven is also like being caught up in dragnet that catches all the fish of the sea without discrimination and leaves the sorting for later.

But today, we switch gears to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration. We move away from kingdom teaching and agricultural parables to an epiphany story – one in which Jesus' true nature and identity is revealed. In this story from the gospel of Luke, Jesus takes the disciples Peter, James, and John with him up a mountain. It's been a long and busy couple of weeks for Jesus and his followers. They have just come from a intense run of teachings, healings and

miraculous feedings. Jesus and his followers have been harassed endlessly by the persistent crowds desperate for Jesus' presence and power. They have finally begun to comprehend who this Jesus is and what is his mission. Peter has confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, God's anointed one and, in response, Jesus then tells them what is going to happen in the coming weeks and months. The impossible specter of Jerusalem and the cross has been set before them and, in the shadow of that future, Jesus describes taught them what it will mean to be his disciples.

Now, just a few days later, Jesus takes these three on a long hike up a mountain to pray. One would think that they could pray just as easily someplace else more convenient and with a less strenuous journey, but it turns out that the mountain imagery is important. On this mountain, Peter, James, and John are "weighed down by sleep" but manage remain awake as Jesus prays...and then it happens. Right there, Jesus is transfigured before them: he shines like the sun and his clothes become a dazzling white. With him appears Moses and Elijah and they are talking about Jesus' departure – his exodus – that would occur in Jerusalem. Peter gets excited, as he often does, and blurts out a suggestion that they mark this amazing event by erecting tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. A cloud from heaven overshadows them and a voice says, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" Then just as suddenly as it happened, the voice, the cloud, and the vision of Moses and Elijah all disappear.

This is a remarkable story and it can feel like it just pops up out of nowhere. But there is a reason the lectionary authors have matched this gospel lesson with the first lesson we heard from Exodus. If it seems there were some similarities in the accounts of Moses's shining face as he returned down Mount Sinai after his encounter with the LORD and Jesus' transfiguration and shining in glory on this other mountain top, it is quite intentional. These lessons reflect each other and Luke most certainly had this passage of Moses in mind when putting together his account of the transfiguration of Jesus.

Like Moses, Jesus ascends a mountain to commune with God. Like Moses, Jesus shines with the glory of God. But that is where the similarities end. Moses is transformed from his direct contact with God – his face shines with the brightness of God's glory – but his is reflected glory. Jesus on the other hand was transfigured, not transformed. Jesus was not changed, rather his truth was revealed. His is not a passively radiant face, like Moses'. His is the face of the One in whose presence Moses glowed. It is most certainly God himself who is here. While Moses' face shone with God's glory, Jesus' entire being was radiant and dazzling bright. Moses reflected God's glory but Jesus bears it fully.

As children of God and as members of the Body of Christ we, too, are meant shine and reflect the Father's glory. Few of us will have mountaintop experiences of direct encounter with God, but we all may experience the God's glory found in the seeds of His kingdom that are sowed throughout all creation. The experience of God in the midst of our ordinary, and sometimes extraordinary, lives transforms us from the inside out. We, like, Moses, cannot help but shine with God's reflected glory when we encounter the kingdom of heaven. We bear God's reflected glory upon our very being, bringing into the world the brightness of God's love.

And this light – this glory – is a gift, but it is also a responsibility. It is not to be hoarded and kept private within ourselves but is meant to be shared. God's love is meant to shine all through his creation. Jesus calls us not to hide our light but rather to put it on lampstand, giving light to all in the house. We shine with glory not for ourselves but for each other and especially for all the children of God who are lost in the darkness.

In a poem about Jesus' Transfiguration, poet and Anglican priest Malcolm Guite writes this:

*The Love that dances at the hearts of things
Sone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin*

Try as we might, however, we cannot generate the light ourselves. The light that flickers within us has been given to us by our Creator and it is in the presence of this Creator and His kingdom that our light comes alive. Despite what the marketing of our consumer culture preaches, we cannot buy our way into glory. No matter what we buy, eat, drive or wear, it is God's love given to us that will make us shine.

Karl Barth who reminds us, "For it is the risen Lord who is the one who makes us radiant. We ourselves cannot put on bright faces. But neither can we prevent them from shining. Looking up to him, our faces shine." May we continually turn our faces to the risen Christ and have our hearts set ablaze with God's love, radiating light and hope to each other and to the world.

Amen.