

The Transfiguration foreshadows the light that explodes

Luke 9:28-36

A sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the coming of the light. As the Gospel of John states: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the Festival of the Transfiguration. In the Gospel text we are brought to the mountaintop. From there we look out over the valley below and look forward to the horrible events to come. What lies below is deep darkness, the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus will be abandoned, betrayed, mocked, suffer, die, and rise again.

The coming season of Lent is the season of deep darkness, the dark night of the soul.

What is that about? We commonly think of Lent as a time of depriving ourselves of something we enjoy, a penitential season. While giving-up-something-for-Lent can be a useful practice, it can also be another kind of I-can-make-it-happen "spirituality," a false religion, a way of applauding and punishing ourselves. In short, another way of playing God. The real purpose of Lent is to draw us away from every day distractions in order to focus on the big question: What about forever?

Because Lent follows the liturgical calendar, the exact date of Lent each year changes. Lent begins 46 days before Easter (40 days of fasting and 6 Sundays). The liturgical color for Lent is purple because it is associated with mourning and anticipates the pain and suffering of the crucifixion, and secondly, because purple is the color of royalty and celebrates Christ's resurrection and sovereignty.

The phrase, "the dark night of the soul," was coined by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Catholic monk and mystic poet, who lived shortly after Martin Luther and became a major figure in the Counter-Reformation.

"The dark night of the soul" echoes the words of Isaiah 50:10: "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?"

The Twenty-Third Psalm 23 also talks about the deep darkness: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." In Hebrew "the shadow of death" is "deep darkness," and it refers to times of intense crises in our lives, times of confusion and loss of meaning, facing the loss of a job or income, the death of a loved one, a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness, and even our own eventual death.

Before Lent and the valley of deep darkness, the Gospel text for this last Sunday of Epiphany takes us to the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, John, and James.

Only about a week earlier, Jesus had intimated to his disciples he must suffer and die. They were distracted and confused.

Jesus then takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain. There, as Jesus was praying, an aura of light seemed to shine within and around him. His clothing became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah (the law and the prophets), appeared with him, and a voice from the cloud announced: "This is my Son, my Chosen (Beloved)."

All of this is a way of saying: He's not another one; he is "the one," the one who will solve the terrible problem of sin and death.

It says the disciples "saw his glory" (Luke 9:32).

We know about that glory, first from the angels who sang "glory" over the manger. And also, at beginning of John's Gospel, John 1:14: "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father." Then in John 12:23, shortly before the crucifixion, Jesus says: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." John 12:28: "'Father, glorify thy name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'"

These texts about "glory" are like pealing bells reverberating in the heavens, from the manger to the mountain, and then on to the place of reckoning, to that event that changes everything, the cross and resurrection.

What does it mean for us? This deep darkness, the cross, and the glory.

We are helped by remembering Luther. He faced deep darkness, trouble upon trouble. The church hierarchy was deeply corrupt. There were Holy Rollers, political zealots, and superstition all around. The Turks were at the gates of Vienna. On top of all that he had serious health problems and family troubles, including the death of his beloved daughter.

Luther said that all Christians are in the battle with the Devil, and in that battle, there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. Yet he was sustained in the battle by the Word that "the just shall live by faith." And life, eternal life, doesn't begin in heaven; it begins in Baptism.

An ancient axiom well-known in the Middle Ages was: "Remember your death." Remember the fragility of your life. From dust to dust.

Luther took this medieval axiom and turned it on its head. He wrote: "In the midst of life we are ringed 'round by death,' but the Gospel reverses this, saying: 'In the midst of death we are ringed 'round by life' because we have the forgiveness of sin" (LW 13:83).

That's what it's about: The forgiveness of sin.

Jesus came down from the mountain and as Luke says: "He set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

We set our face, our focus, on him as we head into Lent, Good Friday, and then Easter Sunday (April 20).

Paul writes: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:14, 20). Again Paul:

"He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:7-10).

The light explodes. The tomb is empty. Glory. Hallelujah. Amen