

The Transfiguration  
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Rev. Dn. Scott Deasy

Let the words of my and the  
meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.  
AMEN

Today's gospel story is a familiar one. So familiar in fact, that it is easy to dismiss. The Transfiguration event was an epiphany-like experience for the three disciples in their state of exhaustion. Even a superficial knowledge of the Old Testament allows one to grasp the meaning of the presence of Moses, the leader of the Exodus of the Jews and giver of the law, and Elijah the greatest prophet. I invite you today to step back and listen to this gospel story anew and consider how it impacts us today.

The author of Luke very systematically organized this book into 7 parts, beginning with the infancy and childhood narratives and ending with the resurrection narrative. Today's gospel reading is found at the end of the third section, Jesus's ministry in Galilee. This reading is a transition point, summing up the meaning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and preparing one for the fourth section of Luke's gospel, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

Just prior to the Transfiguration story, Jesus had asked the question of this disciples "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They responded that he was thought to be John the Baptist, Elijah, and other prophets. He then asked, "But who do you say I am?" to which Peter responded, "The Messiah of God." Immediately, Jesus admonishes them to tell no one and goes on to explain that he will suffer, be rejected, be killed, and on the third day, raised. Jesus then went with Peter, James, and John to the mountain to pray.

So, who "was" Jesus; who "is" Jesus? The event of the Transfiguration addresses this question. The very question that Jesus had asked his disciples then and as his current disciples, asks us today.

Before going further, I have a confession to make to you all. When I write my sermons, I repeatedly have problems assigning the proper verb tense when referring to Jesus, his words, and his actions.

In my defense, I would like to point out that I am not the only one who has difficulty assigning the proper verb tense when referring to Jesus. When we speak of Jesus as an individual, his teachings, or of his actions, whether to use the past tense "was" or the present tense "is" can at times tie one up in knots. Your choice reflects your understanding of Jesus! This, of course, is the very question that Jesus asked his disciples before the Transfiguration. This acknowledges that Jesus "was" and Jesus "is."

The story of the Transfiguration can be found in the gospels of Luke, Matthew, and Mark. Luke contains information not found in the other two books, namely the content of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It is somewhat unfortunate that today we read the NRSV version of the Bible. This translation states that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah “were speaking of his [Jesus’s] departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” Other translations use the word “journey,” “death,” and “exodus” rather than “departure.” The updated New Revised Standard Version as well as the Message Bible use the word “exodus.” The Message bible translates this phrase as “They talked over his exodus; the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem.”

“Exodus” versus “departure.” These words, although considered synonyms, I believe have radically different meanings and impact for us today. The origin of the word “departure” is from the Latin “dispertire” which originally meant to “separate,” to “go away.” “Exodus” refers to a mass departure of people, a mass migration of those at the margins of society. These individuals are given an opportunity for a different reality, one inspired by the divine. Simply stated, if Jesus was planning a departure, he “was” leaving. If Jesus was planning an exodus, he “is” leading us somewhere else. We are back to the question of “is” versus “was.”

The way popular culture incorporates these words is illuminating. The movie *Exodus*, a historical drama about the founding of Israel, is powerful and inspiring. It was directed by Otto Preminger, with the movie score written by Ernest Gold. It received two Oscar awards and one Emmy and stimulated a great deal of support within the US for Israel. The word “exodus” today tends to bring to mind heroic, sacrificial, dramatic acts that bring about positive change.

Not so much with “departure.” Two recent movies with the title “Departure” concern a “family unraveling in the south of France,” and a “plane load of passengers disappearing over the Atlantic.” I cannot imagine myself paying money to go to a theatre to see either movie based upon the title or the description.

Bob Marley in the 1970s wrote and recorded a song entitled. “Exodus.” The lyrics ask us to look within and ask the question “are we satisfied?” The refrain is “Movement of Jah People.”

Finally, the Bible contains a book entitled “Exodus,” not a book called “Departure.”

Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were discussing another “exodus.” I envision them discussing the freeing of people from bondage, from injustice, talking about radical change, a mass movement, a social movement, and focusing on the Reign of God – the Beloved Community. I can also envision that drawing from Moses’ personal experience, they anticipated an “exodus” that would unfold over a considerable period of time, into our time and beyond. An “exodus” with many false starts and detours.

They were not taking about Jesus's exit stage left. Jesus was not wrapping up loose ends before heading to the departure gate at SEATAC. They were affirming Peter's confession that Jesus IS the Messiah, the one who will liberate the peoples. They were preparing for the future. These are "is" moments.

Another component of the reading that I have always found perplexing is Peter's suggestion that they "make three dwellings, one for you [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah." The author of Luke also acknowledged that Peter did not "know what he had said."

Moses had dwelt with followers, the Israelites, who failed to faithfully follow his call. Jesus' disciples were following the same pattern of behavior. They declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but actions proved otherwise.

Poor Peter, he was again caught up in an event that he could not understand and rather than seek understanding and faithfully following Jesus, he acted impulsively. Peter had heard the discussion of Jesus' mission, the same mission that Jesus had outlined with Peter, John, and James before they followed Jesus up the mountain. Rather than prepare for events that would unfold in Jerusalem, Peter wanted to freeze and celebrate that amazing moment on the mountain by building a memorial. His operative verb, "was." He was not ready to fully participate in the "exodus" Jesus was leading.

"Then a cloud came and overshadowed them." The divine, the creator enveloped, embraced them. Although afraid, they were safe. It was a totally inclusive, immersive act. There was no punishment for their failures, just mystery and a presence. They were accepted as who they were. God clearly spoke to them in their language. "This is my Son, my Chosen." Our creator affirmed to Peter, John, and James that Peter's confession was spot on. Jesus is the liberator. And the voice exclaimed, "listen to him!" It was a call to action, not enshrinement.

Today, please consider that we are members of an "exodus" that began two thousand years ago. This journey has had false starts and detours and there are probably more in the future. We are members of the Beloved Community of today; we are to "listen to him" as we strive for the Beloved Community of tomorrow.

Jesus "is!"

Amen