The Transfiguration / 2.10.2013 / Luke 9:28-43

Don Holmstrom

 A few Wednesdays ago, the 7th and 8th grade confirmation classes studied the story of the

Transfiguration. We looked at this morning’s Gospel reading from Luke and noted some things of importance.

We pointed out that when a mountain and a cloud show up in a Bible story it means God is in the neighborhood; that the brightness of the appearance and clothing of Jesus gives us a foretaste of Easter and the resurrection; that Moses and Elijah who appear with Jesus were key figures of Jewish history, Moses the law giver, Elijah the prophet who signals the coming of the Messiah.

We noted that Peter got it wrong when he wanted to stay on the mountain and construct shrines, as if the story of Jesus had ended there. We spoke of how the words of God in this story were so similar to God’s words at the River Jordan when Jesus was baptized by John: “This is my Son,” God said, “my Chosen.” And we noticed that after God’s proclamation from the cloud, Moses and Elijah vanish and just Jesus is left standing there—as if to say, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible.

We wrapped up our confirmation class that night by looking at the way artists have painted this scene. The Transfiguration is one of the most painted of all biblical stories. So we projected on the screen several art works, one at a time, and studied them.

We looked at Raphael’s painting—his final painting, as it turned out. The artist uses rich colors to depict Jesus and Moses and Elijah floating a few feet above the mountaintop. A bright light shines from the stormy clouds behind Jesus. The Lord’s gleaming robe swirls in the wind. Moses holds a tablet of the Ten Commandments, while Elijah gazes in wonder at Jesus, the Messiah. Lying in awe and fear at their feet are the disciples, and a little further down the mountain a crowd of people are pointing and gesturing in amazement.

It was fun to watch the students’ reactions to the various paintings. They couldn’t wait to get up and point to what they saw. And it was especially fun to watch their excitement when we showed a few abstract paintings of the Transfiguration. Colorful brush strokes were dashed here and there with no easily recognizable features. But one student said, “There’s Moses,” and pointed. “This is the cloud, right here,” another jumped up to say. And another said, “That’s Jesus’ nose right there.”

Which just goes to show that the story of the Transfiguration is open to many interpretations. And that’s so because it is filled with wondrous moments, all swirling together in that flash of light on the mountain.

But this morning, I want to look at one small moment that might get lost amid the fireworks of the story. I’m speaking of the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. What do you suppose they were talking about in the midst of such light and glory, amazement and wonder? Well, Luke tells us the three were discussing the Lord’s departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. The word “departure” is a translation of the Greek word “exodus.” We’ve heard that word before, haven’t we? Exodus is what Moses accomplished when he led the people of Israel through the Red Sea and into freedom from slavery’s bondage. Exodus is what Jesus will accomplish on the cross of Calvary. He will lead the people out of bondage—the bondage to fear and sin and death. He will do so by dying and then rising again. On that mountaintop of glorious light, Moses and Elijah are discussing Jesus’ departure, his death.

Death is quite the contrast to all the wonders on that mountaintop! It’s not strange that Peter wants to build shrines and stay put. Because leaving that mountain and traveling to Jerusalem will involve a cross at the end of the line. It’s a notion too painful for Peter.

There is a story told of a medieval monk who is watching one morning as laborers work on building a bridge across a chasm in the Alps. Suddenly, horrifyingly, a laborer stumbles and then falls to his death. Later, as the monk pondered what he saw, this religious man commented, “In the midst of life we are in death.” Martin Luther took these words and wrote a hymn. But Luther went on to say that the gospel and faith invert these words. Because of Jesus, it is no longer, “In the midst of life we are in death,” but rather, “In the midst of death we are in life.”

We see that illustrated in the brief story that follows the Transfiguration. Descending from the mountain, Jesus meets a man in dire straits. His son, his only child, is in the grip of what was thought to be an unclean spirit, though today we might diagnose it as an epileptic seizure. Whatever the case, it is a horror for both father and son.

But into this horrifying darkness steps the Light of the World. In the midst of illness and death, there is life. Jesus heals the boy, and hands him back to his father. The light shines in the darkness.

Several years ago, after a Good Friday service here at First Lutheran, I was walking through the dark and empty halls, when I glanced into this nave. Standing in the shadows of the altar was the wooden cross of Good Friday. Across the way, I saw the flame of the eternal candle over the baptismal font.

And then I noticed two women standing at the font. Their heads were bowed in prayer. Not wanting to intrude, I turned and left silently.

A few days later, one of the women came and told me about that moment. Her friend, she said, was having a difficult time that night, thinking about recent losses in her life. So on that Good Friday evening these two friends gathered to pray together.

What better place to pray, than at the baptismal font where God’s promises were made. What better place to pray, than in the light of that candle on Good Friday. For there we remember that when the shadows of our own Good Friday comes, God’s promises will be kept, the light will shine. “You are my child,” God said in the water and the word. “Nothing can separate you from my love.”

On the mountaintop, Jesus is holding a conversation about his departure. Death and darkness await him in Jerusalem. But they are not the end of the story. For the tomb will open, and the Light of the World will step forth, and the light will shine on and on and on, until someday everyone will stand in its brightness. Amen.