

Apostles Anglican Church

Fr. John A. Roop

The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ

(First Service)

(Ex 34:29-35/Ps 99/2 Peter 1:13-21/Luke 9:28-36)

Luke 9:34–36 (ESV): 34 As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

My wife’s memory is a steel trap; mine is a pasta strainer. And, that difference sets the stage for some recurring conversations at our house. We settle in after supper to watch an episode of some British crime drama, one with multiple characters and a complex plot, which is already a problem for me; three characters and one simple story line is my ideal. Now, understand, it may have been three weeks since we watched the previous episode. A character comes on screen, one I’m certain I’ve never seen before, and I ask, “Do we know him? Who is he? How does he fit into the story?” Then, Clare mutes the TV and says, “Sure. Don’t you remember? He’s ...” and then she identifies the character and places him in the proper context of the story for me, knowing that three weeks later I’ll probably ask the same question.

Identity and context — Who is this person? and How does he fit into the story? — those are the essential elements for making sense of any given episode within a narrative, any moment in history, any event in a life. It is certainly true in the grand, sweeping arc of the scriptural narrative. Any event in Scripture means what it means — means anything at all to us — only insofar as we understand the identity of the characters and the context of the event within the whole story. Who is he? How does he fit into the story?

These were the questions that hung in the air around Jesus, spoken and unspoken by those who encountered him or heard rumors of him. John the Forerunner, the one who had himself baptized Jesus, the one who had pointed his own disciples to Jesus with the words, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” still had these questions after he was imprisoned by Herod:

Luke 7:18–20 (ESV): 18 The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 19 calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ ”

Who are you, Jesus? How do you fit into the story? John wants to know.

Luke 7:21–23 (ESV): 21 In that hour (Jesus) healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. 22 And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

To those steeped in the narrative of Israel, to those filled with the hope of the prophets, this is a clear answer. Hear Isaiah:

Isaiah 35:2–6 (ESV):

2b They (the exiles of Israel) shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who have an anxious heart, (say to John the Baptist)

“Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

Who is this man Jesus? Your *God* will come and save you, Isaiah sees and says. And when God comes, you will know it by this: the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, and the mute will sing.

How does Jesus fit into the story? His ministry, his mission, is nothing less than the ransom, the redemption, the deliverance of Israel prophesied when God himself comes to establish his kingdom.

Still others were asking the same questions: Herod, following his execution of John the Baptist, for example:

Luke 9:7–9 (ESV): 7 Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. 9 Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

In the end, Herod did see Jesus and almost certainly asked him these questions: Who are you? How do you fit into the story? Jesus never answered him directly. After all, you do not give dogs what is holy, nor do you cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you (ref Mt 7:6).

The crowds that followed Jesus, the crowds that assembled wherever he was, had the same questions:

Luke 9:18–19 (ESV): 18 Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” 19 And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.”

The crowds, it seems, were as confused as Herod, though all the evidence was on clear display: those with eyes to see, saw, and those with ears to hear, heard. The others remained spiritually blind and deaf.

These were the right questions, the questions that Jesus wanted people to ask. And he even pressed his disciples — the Twelve — to ask them:

Luke 9:20 (ESV): 20 Then he said to (his disciples), “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”

You get the sense in reading the Gospels, that this was the moment — the answer — Jesus had been waiting for, the moment when his ministry pivoted toward the cross:

Luke 9:21–22 (ESV): 21 And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, 22 saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

So, God has revealed to Peter the answer to the first question: Who is this man Jesus? Peter doesn't fully understand; he doesn't really know yet what he has said. Clarity will come in time. In fact, it begins to dawn just eight days after his confession of Jesus as the Christ of God.

Luke 9:28 (ESV): 28 Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.

I've heard that in real estate, three things matter most: location, location, location. That can be true in Scripture, as well. Jesus takes the Three to a mountain, perhaps to Mount Tabor. Why a mountain? Because mountains are where people go to encounter God; mountains are where God calls people when he wants to reveal himself. Moses first encountered God — in the burning bush — on Mount Horeb. Later, God called Moses to himself on Mount Sinai — probably the same mountain as Horeb — to reveal himself and his Law. Elijah encountered God, in the spectacular contest with the

prophets of Baal, on Mount Carmel. Forty days later, God called Elijah to Mount Horeb and there revealed himself not in the earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the still small voice. So, Jesus calls the Three to go up a mountain with him to pray because that's what God does; the stage, the location, is set.

Luke 9:29–31 (ESV): 29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. 30 And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

What is it we see? Who is this man Jesus? There is more to ponder here than we are able: Jesus is the burning bush on fire with the glory of God but not consumed; Jesus is the thunder and lightning and smoke and trumpet on Mount Sinai that heralded the presence of God; Jesus is the fire from heaven that consumed both the sacrifice and the altar that Elijah had laid on Mount Carmel; Jesus is the glory of God that made the face of Moses shine; Jesus is earthquake, wind, and fire and, yes, the still, small voice of God that Elijah heard. Jesus is God incarnate, revealing the glory with which the first man Adam was clothed in the garden and the glory yet to come when we shall be reclothed fully in the new, last Adam. Who is this man Jesus? This is who he is.

Moses and Elijah are there, basking in his glory, speaking with Jesus about the *departure* he will soon accomplish in Jerusalem. Departure: what a feeble translation that is! The text says they are speaking to Jesus about the *exodus* he will accomplish. Departure is a mere leaving. Exodus is a triumphal procession. A great conflict is coming; *the* great conflict is coming in Jerusalem when, like Moses, Jesus will conquer the power of empire, when, like Elijah, Jesus will conquer the power of false prophets and false religion. All the powers that vaunt themselves against God, all the evil that was, is, or ever shall be, all the spiritual powers of wickedness in the heavenly places are converging on Jerusalem to do battle against the Lord and against his anointed. And though it will look for a time as if those powers have won, three days later Jesus will accomplish his exodus. Three days later, the psalm will be fulfilled:

Psalm 118:10–14 (ESV): 10 All nations surrounded me;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
11 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
12 They surrounded me like bees;
they went out like a fire among thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
13 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the Lord helped me.
14 The Lord is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.

Yes, Moses and Elijah, who through the power of God had won their own victories over the powers, were speaking to Jesus about his victory, his exodus over all that opposes

God. How does Jesus fit into the story? This is how he fits into the story: God himself come to rescue his people. It is not so much that Jesus fits *into* the story, but more that Jesus *is* the story.

Peter, John, and James have been sleeping through all this — perhaps physically, but certainly spiritually; they have been asleep, oblivious to the true nature of Jesus' identity and purpose. But now they begin to wake, to see. And it seems good to them, so good that Peter wants to prolong the experience, to build dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. But that is, once again, to miss the point of Jesus' identity and place in the story.

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There is a term in Greek and Roman drama — *deus ex machina* — used to describe the sudden appearance of a god on stage to resolve the plot of the drama. The actor representing the god was often lowered by a machine onto the stage (*deus ex machina* means god from the machine), god descending, as it were, from the heavens. But this is not a play; this is the Gospel in which God, not an actor playing god, comes down in a cloud to resolve the plot. And what is the resolution? “This is my Son, my chosen One; listen to him!” Moses had his day, and Elijah his — both faithful servants and signposts pointing toward something, someone greater. And now the greater is here. Moses and Elijah were servants; Jesus is the Son. And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

Who is this man Jesus? He is the Son of God, the One chosen to accomplish the great exodus for the whole world. How does Jesus fit into the story? Jesus *is* the story: not Moses, not Elijah, but Jesus alone, for Jesus alone can defeat all the powers of empire and evil standing athwart the purposes of God, Jesus alone can deliver man from slavery to sin and death, Jesus alone can inaugurate and reign over the Kingdom of God.

But, his exodus, his victory is not going to look like Peter, John, and James think it will look or should look. His weapon will not be a staff with which to call forth plagues from God, or even an altar drenched with water with which to humiliate false prophets. It most certainly will not be an army with which to overcome Rome. It will be a cross on which Jesus will take upon himself all the sin of the world and all God's condemnation of that sin, all the suffering of the world, all the death of the world. By taking all that upon himself, he rescues and redeems us. By absorbing all that within himself, he exhausts its power. And,

by his resurrection he broke the bonds of death, trampling Hell and Satan under his feet. As our great high priest, he ascended to (God's) right hand in glory, that

we might come with confidence before the throne of grace (cf The Prayer of Consecration, BCP 2019, p. 133).

That's who this man Jesus is. That's how he fits into the story.

The Transfiguration has its answers to the questions of identity and context: Who is this man Jesus? and How does he fit into the story? But, it also turns those questions back on us, asks the questions of us with a twist: Who are *you*? and How do *you* fit into the story?

For us, identity depends upon belief. John, who was on the Mount of Transfiguration and beheld Jesus in his glory, John who heard the voice of God say, "This is my beloved Son," wrote these words in the Prologue of his Gospel:

John 1:9–13 (ESV): 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Who are you? If you have received the Son of God, if you believe in the Son of God, if you have been born of God in the water of baptism and in the power of the Holy Spirit, then you are a child of God. And John continues that same theme in his first epistle:

1 John 3:1–3 (ESV): 3 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Those in Christ Jesus are the children of God — now — and when he appears we shall see him as he is — in all his glory — and we shall be transfigured to be like him. In fact, we are even now being transformed as St. Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV): 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

This is who we are: children of God being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another as we await his coming and our final glorification in him.

And what is our place in the story? To live out our identity as children of God in the midst of a fallen world: to be salt and light; to live as citizens of heaven and as resident

aliens in this world now; to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves; to worship God and God alone.

Who is this man Jesus? What is his place in the story? Who are we? What is our place in the story? All these questions go together, and all are caught up together in the great mystery of the Transfiguration — Jesus's and ours.

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Amen.