

North Kildonan United Church

27th February 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Transfiguration”

Exodus 34: 29-35

II Corinthians 3: 12 - 4:2

Luke 9: 28-36

Holy God, you revealed to the disciples the everlasting glory of Jesus Christ. Grant us, who have not seen and yet believe, the gift of your Holy Spirit, that we may boldly live the gospel and shine with your transforming glory as people changed and changing through the redeeming presence of our Saviour. Amen.

The story is told, presumably true but possibly not, that on the eve of the Russian Revolution, October 1917 to be precise, in the third year of the Great War later to be named the First World War, in that time of social and political upheaval, the Russian Orthodox Church, the State Church of Russia, at an assembly of their ecclesiastical leadership, their clergy, bishops and archbishops, at that synod the focus of their debate centred on the correct colour for their clerical vestments.

Meanwhile in that same month, the Bolsheviks were planning a revolution. With Vladimir Lenin as their leader, 500 miles away in St Petersburg, the Russian Revolution broke out, transforming the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union and relegating the Orthodox Church into a suppressed, subservient institution. An institution that over the following 70 years had far more to worry about than what colour to use.

I have to admit that the terrible events going on in Ukraine these days makes it hard to focus on the lessons for this day. On one level, Luke's account of the Transfiguration pales in significance compared to the clash of weapons and mounting casualties on the Ukrainian border. It's too early to know much about what is actually happening there, but the whole situation is terribly concerning. Especially concerning for those of our congregation, city, province and country, who share a Ukrainian heritage or have relatives or friends in harm's way in Ukraine. Our hearts are with those who are suffering there and equally so with the Ukrainian *diaspora* in Canada and elsewhere. And just so we are all on board here, *diaspora* is defined as "the dispersion of any people from their original homeland." Canada apparently has the highest number of Ukrainians outside of Ukraine, so this is a definite reason for concern for both those of Ukrainian heritage and for others like myself who are not a part of the diaspora.

So we watch and worry and pray and hope. We wonder if history is repeating itself, if this is 1939 all over again, since the parallels are strong. And while we fear for the worst, and sadly there is just cause for that emotion at the moment, we look for wisdom beyond the news reports and our own speculation.

First of all, history never completely repeats itself. The world is organized differently from those waning days of the Great Depression, when countries were more focussed on their own problems and communication was somewhat limited. The troubles

our country just went through seem trivial compared to the thought of soldiers crossing the borders, armed and ready to kill. Now is the time for partisan politics to be put aside for the sake of a united front and a spirit of cooperation as Canada plays its role in this conflict. Now is not the time for division.

In the midst of all this chaos and conflict, we are still people of faith who seek and find wisdom and strength in the promises of God. So the word this day is not an assessment of the battlefield or the stirring up of fear. The word this day is found in the sacred scriptures, so let us turn to the Word.

In our journey through Luke's gospel, we have been hearing of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We heard of his invitation to Simon Peter and others to join him, how he taught in the synagogues and declared himself to be the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, the anointed one who brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to those oppressed. We went fishing with Jesus and Peter and struggled with his teachings in his Sermon on the Plain.

Now we are in a special moment, a holy moment, a moment of transfiguration. In common with Matthew and Mark, Luke tells us that Jesus takes Peter and James and John with him up a high mountain to pray. Deep in prayer, Jesus' face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus, and the three talk about what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. Common with the other gospels, Peter suggests that dwellings should be made for the three, in an attempt, though misguided, to keep the moment forever. Once again, just like at Jesus' baptism, a voice from the cloud proclaims: "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*" The moment was over, but the memory remained for Jesus, Peter, James and John, and they came down from the mountain the next day.

This time on the mountain is the turning point for Jesus's ministry, his turning towards Jerusalem and the culmination of his life on earth. When the four descend from this high and holy place Jesus is a changed person, resolute in his mission to face what lies ahead.

The journey to Jerusalem now begins, a journey that ends in a very different way, on another hill, with the agony of the cross, humiliation instead of glorification, no comforting Hebrew patriarchs to chat with, no friends, no joy, no reassuring voice of God. Just "*three dreadful hours of great pain, O my soul...*" as the old spiritual puts it.

At the edge of the beginning of Lent we find the Jesus of the Transfiguration, the Jesus we are comfortable with, the Jesus we want, the successful, glorified, beautiful Saviour, the Jesus many proclaim and hold onto.

At the other end of Lent we find the Jesus of Calvary, the Jesus we actually need, the One crucified by us, the One broken for our sake.

And we live the time of Lent between these two high places, between Transfiguration and Calvary. Next Sunday we will begin our journey through Lent.

I wish to end today's sermon with a few comments about our Hebrew Scripture lesson from Exodus. In the account we heard, as Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, the passage says that all the Israelites saw that Moses's face was shining, just like the face of Jesus in the Transfiguration. It was a frightening sight so Moses put on a veil when he was talking with the people but not when Moses was talking with God. Sort of a version of wearing a mask indoors but not outdoors, no disrespect intended. This story of Moses shining unwittingly with God's glory became popular in later Jewish legend.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians makes some pointed and perhaps not accurate comments about the minds of the Jewish people being veiled because they have not accepted Christ. That's probably fodder for another sermon, another time.

So Moses's face shone because he had been talking with God.

'Beaming', is the way it was described in an ancient biblical text. But in the 12th century, that word 'beaming' was mistranslated as 'horned'. Several artists picked up on the Moses with horns motif and depicted Moses as having small horns on his forehead. You can imagine what Moses would look like with horns, how nasty his appearance might seem to be.

Actually you don't have to imagine a Moses with horns. If you happen to find yourself in the Manitoba Legislative Building and end up in the Legislative Assembly, the room where the MLAs meet to debate, you will see a bronze statue of Moses holding the Ten Commandments. If you look at his face you will see two small horns, just like the mistranslation of the 12th century. But this mistranslation has implications beyond artwork.

Wednesday evening I joined over 100 other people in a zoom lecture by Amy-Jill Levine, a wonderful New Testament professor who is actually Jewish. In the course of her lecture she told of the time two nice Methodist ladies in the Southern United States looked closely at her and said they were pleased to see she didn't have horns, because they thought all Jewish people had horns.

The troubles a mistranslation can cause. Amen.