

Sunday, February 24, 2013: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-36

by [James Alison](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue

Today we have a theophany of light in which the Lord reveals what he is going to do and indicates that equality with God is not a thing to be grasped. This is in contrast with the theophany of darkness in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he shows himself as one humbling himself even unto death, and where he reveals his name so that those who've come to take him fall down before that name (John 18:6, ESV).

It took the priests in 2 Chronicles 29 eight days to cleanse their way through the temple to the portico of the Lord so that here, after eight days, the Lord could show himself. The Maccabees celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and eight days was the appropriate time to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, as Peter seems to have remembered in Luke. Much is being enacted here on the mountain.

In front of his three witnesses, Jesus' face changes. The form of his face, Luke says, is a conscious allusion to the *panim* or "faces" of the Lord. This is not a passively radiant face, like Moses' face as he came down from Sinai. This is the face of the One in whose presence Moses glowed. And Jesus' clothes become white "like lightning"—the same word that described the appearance of the Son of Man in the throne visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. It is most certainly YHWH who is here.

Then Moses and Elijah turn up to discuss Jesus' "exodus." Moses had promised his people another prophet, for he himself was not going to be allowed to atone for his people; Elijah had heard a still small voice, pulling him out of depression after he had called down fire from heaven onto his sacrifice. These are the two whom Jesus will be fulfilling on his way up to the altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem. And it is by reference to them, after that event, that Jesus will explain what he is about to the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The disciples do now what one does best at theophanies, which is to fall asleep. With this beautiful touch Luke takes us straight back to our reading from Genesis, the account of the first covenant, the covenant that the Lord is planning to make as he goes in to die for his people—a covenant that goes beyond what he did at Horeb or

Sinai and back to the time of Abraham. After the Lord had made his promise of descendants, Abraham found himself able to trust that the Lord was *for* him and would be *for* him, despite all apparent impossibility of age and mortality. It was this trusting in the goodness and reliability of the One coming toward him that pleased God so that God was able to dwell with pleasure in Abraham, making him pleasing to God and righteous. In God's enthusiasm for Abraham, God wanted to show him how much he loved him by revealing Godself as the sort of person who would agree to be quartered if he didn't fulfill his love—for that's what it would mean to pass between the quartered beasts as a sign of covenant: "May this be done to me if I don't do right by you."

That enthusiastic love is what is to be fulfilled, with the disciples as witnesses, when Jesus comes down from the holy place and goes up to his noncultic altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem: he will enter into that place so as to get across to us how much he loves us and is pleased with us. Abraham slept at the covenant; later, at Mamre, he entertained the Lord and two men with him. So too on this mountain, the disciples awake to glory. Luke hints at Psalm 17:15: "When I awake I shall be satisfied with your likeness," where our word *glory* translates quite specifically as the "form" of the Lord.

As he often does, Peter gets things both exactly right and exactly wrong: he understands that this is a theophany, that it is related to the tabernacle, and even that he is in some way acting out the fulfillment of Abraham at Mamre by wanting to show hospitality. But glory cannot be held, and the full purpose of this glory will be shown in the way that the theophany on the mountain and the self-giving in Jerusalem are intrinsically linked. God is not going to be held back by tabernacles.

Now a cloud of glory overshadows Jesus, just as the cloud (Shekinah) overshadowed the tabernacle in Exodus 40. But there Moses could not enter. Here Jesus is the tabernacle, and the disciples can enter the cloud with him and learn of God's pleasure in a way that is clearly too much for words. This is a sign of what will come upon them at the very end of this whole process at Pentecost, when they will be built into his glory.

Paul knows all this, and knows that we are destined to be bodies that have become sharers in the Lord's light. We can enter into the road between the mountain of transfiguration and the self-giving on the cross so that our transformed bodies, empowered to avoid grasping at passing pleasure out of depression and grief, give off a sense that we are rejoiced in and delighted in and that our Father takes

pleasure in us by dwelling in us.