

On height, Torah, time and glory

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Transfiguration Sunday is the highpoint between Epiphany, when the mystery is suddenly transparent, and the resurrection, when the ultimate epiphany breaks through what we had imagined was the full stop of death. Last year on Transfiguration Sunday our congregation hosted the Rivercity Gospel Jazz band. The service was an explosion of song and prayer and bold preaching that transfigured worship for a Sunday. Something like that seems called for this week.

- The texts are about a longing to know God's way. With Peter in the lead, the disciples are confounded when Jesus leads them down into a world of suffering (Matt. 17:21ff). They imagined that the church was a place of ease rather than a community that bears pain. Jesus takes them up the mountain in the midst of their perplexity about the cruciform way of the Messiah.

Moses and Joshua were also once in search of God's way of life in the Torah. In their absence, Moses leaves Aaron and Hur in charge. They are left to adjudicate disputes in the absence of Moses' wisdom and of God's law. They have only their own wits to sort out the inevitably messy legal disputes and sordid family arguments that are brought to them.

No wonder Psalm 1 speaks of God's law as delightful. Without it there is chaos and confusion. With it, "law" is "gospel." Our habitual theological framing of law over against gospel can cause us to forget that while *legalism* is not gospel, being given a way to live—what Paul calls "the law of Christ"—is very good news.

- The texts take note of time. Moses is on the mountain for 40 days and nights—evoking the long days of the great flood and the long years of the wilderness wandering and Jesus' long wrestling with the Tempter. Reception of God's way did not happen overnight, and it does not happen overnight now. Recall the early

church's long process of catechesis—often three years of preparation before baptism. It takes a long time for God to transfigure our lives.

Moses is called out of the cloud on the seventh day. Jesus takes the disciples up the mountain “six days later,” which suggests that the sabbath, or seventh day, is also the day when life is transfigured and God's way is revealed with clarity. Given the name of our congregation—University Hill—we often imagine that every time we gather to worship we embark on the journey up the Mount of Transfiguration to see clearly what is shrouded from Monday through Saturday.

- The texts take note of glory. Given all the fire and brightness and dazzling clothes in these texts, God's glory apparently has to do with transcendent luminosity. Our culture often equates glory with fame, and with glory in winners of all kinds. But in Hebrew “glory” (*kabod*) means “weight” or “heaviness.” God's glory is God's *gravitas*. To be in God's presence is to experience the massiveness, the immensity of God. When God's glorious voice tells Jesus' inner cabinet of three to “listen to him,” there can be no lingering uncertainty. This is a glorious exclamation mark.

In speaking of this announcement Peter reflects, “We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.” One might expect him to say that because of the Transfiguration the message has been *guaranteed*, but he hedges. Yes, the message is more fully confirmed, but it's not proven. Even the most incredible divine intervention cannot prove that God's way is revealed in Christ. Peter says that the transfiguration is like the gift of a small flashlight in the midst of a power outage, like a lantern in the deep darkness—useful in the meantime “until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts” (2 Peter 1:19).