

Glory goes forth

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For this Transfiguration Sunday, the preacher faces at least two temptations.

The first is to move too quickly to the pastoral and personal dimensions of these texts, to consider how we, too, are transfigured by God's love, glory and grace. And the epistle lesson does [bring this theme up](#). But Exodus and Luke invite us to explore the nature of God's glory itself, and it's rewarding to focus first on these rich texts.

When Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai, he doesn't just have a frighteningly shiny face. He also carries the two tablets of the covenant, a second-chance way for his people to live gracefully with God. In the wake of an intimate dialogue with the almighty, Moses comes bearing God's fearsome radiance—and a gift.

The Hebrew word that we translate as “shining” implies beams of light coming forth from Moses's face. Jerome translated it as “horn,” leading Michelangelo and others to depict Moses with devil-like protrusions. This is an unfortunate distortion in more than one way, for it implies a glory that extends—but only slightly.

The Israelites beholding Moses know otherwise, for they are keenly affected by his transformation. This is no mere glow that surrounds only him. God's glory moves outward into the world.

Among the synoptic writers, Luke alone depicts a frank and intimate conversation among Jesus, Moses and Elijah that is clearly about Jesus' own “exodus” or “departure.” What do they mean? Are they talking only about his journey toward Jerusalem—with its horrifying and hallowed end—or also about the resurrection and ascension?

Scholars debate the details, but what's clear is that Jesus is discussing how next he will move in the world. It's often said that contemplation and action cannot be separated. Here Jesus focuses on action even in the midst of intense, transfiguring communion with the divine.

Then Jesus comes down from the mountaintop rather quickly—"on the next day." Luke makes very clear that the three sleepy-eyed disciples are dumbfounded by what they have seen and heard.

And then come the parenthetical verses the lectionary lists for Luke (9:37-43). Neglecting or omitting this passage is the preacher's second temptation: between the shining of Moses and the dazzling of Jesus, it's easy to decide that there's already enough to talk about.

But Luke concludes these additional verses—in which Jesus expresses unbecoming frustration and then heals a boy whom the disciples apparently could not—with a big statement. Back on the mountain, the three disciples were amazed. Now at the healing, "*all* were astounded at the greatness of God." God's glory goes forth into the world.

In her memoir *Breathing Space*—about ministry at a church named after the transfiguration—Heidi Neumark writes this:

Living high up in the rarefied air isn't the point of transfiguration ... [It was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.

At this hinge between Epiphany and Lent, Moses and Jesus ask us to reflect on the nature of the dazzling divine glory that illuminates them. In Epiphany, we contemplate the ways that Jesus manifests God's light to the ends of an earth blanketed in darkness. This week's stories might be seen as a culmination of this theme of God made manifest, of holy light on the move.