

February 27, Transfiguration B (Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a])

## **In Luke's Gospel, Jesus—like Moses and Elijah—is a figure of *departure*.**

by [Liz Goodman](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue

I have two sons, two years apart in age. When they were babies and toddlers, I was overcome with anxiety. For about two years, I had difficulty functioning, triggered mostly by news of climate change. Of course, climate change is a worrisome fact of our lives these days, one we should put all our problem-solving powers toward addressing. But I'm less anxious about it lately—not because it's any less of a problem, but because my children are teenagers now. Their being less vulnerable in the world has me feeling less vulnerable in the world.

But there's also this ineffable thing, something I perceive about them and others their age. They know what I was once afraid for them to learn. They know they're coming into adulthood with climate change as one of the shaping forces in their lives. What they had once been too young to conceive of, they're now fully aware of—and for the reason of having grown up in this (literally) new environment, I think I sense in them a new fortitude about what must be done.

Maybe I'm fooling myself or shirking responsibility. Or maybe they really will rise to their reality in a way that only those born into this new reality could.

Luke's Jesus has a lot of confidence in the disciples. Indeed, the Luke-Acts diptych is most different from the other Gospel narratives in that Jesus is but one of the main characters. There's also the Holy Spirit, and there's the church. Between these three active "characters" in the grand story Luke tells, there's real ground for hope in the world.

In this way, Luke is perhaps most different from Mark. Though Mark is my favorite Gospel, I confess the Jesus Mark presents often leaves me wondering what we're supposed to do about it all. Mark's Jesus is so singularly effective in making present the kingdom of God that anyone who isn't him might wonder what role they're to

play.

For Luke, it's different. Consider those first to come to the river for baptism by John. They ask this most pressing question: "What are we to *do*?" (3:10). Luke has in mind that we as followers in the way are very much to *do* something—and are empowered to do something by the Holy Spirit.

We're empowered also, according to Luke, by Jesus being one who would come to leave us—to leave us and the world. He wasn't just coming to us or even abiding among us but also departing from us, a point other Gospel narratives emphasize far less.

It's also a point that Luke alone makes in its version of the Transfiguration. When Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, he speaks with them about his "departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." This is the same word that might be translated "exodus." In the other accounts of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear as signs of continuity between the law, the prophets, and Jesus' way. Here, the continuity is more about all of them being figures of departure, of exodus. As Moses was a figure of exodus from slavery amid empire to freedom in the Lord, as Elijah was a figure of departure by ascension to the Lord without dying, so Jesus is a figure of departure.

Indeed, only in Luke-Acts do we get the event of his leaving earth fully imaged, and we get it twice (Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11). It even gives us a feast day, Ascension Day, which is always hard to celebrate too joyfully as it marks the day we were departed from. As it happens, there are several major times in my life when I was left, departed from, broken up with, even abandoned for a time. These aren't happy memories. I don't celebrate them as holidays.

But Luke's take on the aim and effect of Jesus among us abounds with belief that we have what it takes for Jesus to leave us and for us not to be abandoned, for us rather to be empowered to act in Jesus' name. And yes, the disciples might take a moment to come around to this truth, which we see in the story immediately to follow this. Included in the lection for today, parenthetically and so at the preacher's discretion: "I begged your disciples," the desperate father says to Jesus. "I begged them to cast out the spirit of seizure from my son, but they could not." Exasperated, Jesus does it himself. In Acts, though, we'll see that at some point they learn.

Luke's take on Jesus and the church comes late in the first century, when the church had begun to find its footing. There's greater confidence that the church would be able to rise to its mission, to rise to the needs of its generation in the world and then to those of the next. The world would never not need the good news and faithful work of the church. It's just that those needs in their particulars would continually change. While Jesus has departed in real ways from the world and his church, this only makes our mission more urgent, our purpose more pressing.

I'm not looking forward to when my children are grown and at last leave me fully to take on their own lives. But I wouldn't have it any other way. What's more, the world groans for their generation's rising to its many challenges, which I think they're poised to do. Luke-Acts bolsters this faith, trusting as it does the future as the domain of the Holy Spirit. At a time when many people are downright frightened for the future, this could well preach as good news.