

January 12, 2025

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Exodus 34:29-35 & Luke 9:28-43

Who is Jesus? One Who is Chosen

During this season of Epiphany, we have explored the person and work of Jesus, answering the question *Who is this Jesus?* whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. We have caught a glimpse of the divine, yet also very human Christ. We close out this worship series today on Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. Hear now these words from Luke 9:28-36.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which Jesus was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." So opened our worship series *Who is Jesus?*. Our series closes with these words from God: Then from the cloud came a voice that said, *"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"*

Who is Jesus? He is the beloved son of God and the one who was chosen to bring the good news of the gospel to all people. We have learned that Jesus' fulfills the prophesy of one who brings good news to the poor; we have heard how his authority was questioned by the religious leaders of his day; we have heard how he called disciples to be his partners in ministry – in the ministry of healing and teaching and liberation. Just prior to the passage we hear this morning, the disciple Peter calls him the Messiah, the anointed one, the one chosen by God to lead us through the valley of death on Good Friday and the light of resurrection dawn on Easter. He is the one chosen to transfigure death into a radiant new life; to transfigure darkness into light.

As I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin this morning, “think of this passage itself as a high “mountain” in the midst of Luke’s Gospel. On one side, we climb up through stories of Jesus’ healing, liberating ministry. And on the other side, we descend down to Jerusalem. Today, we arrive at a clearing on the mountaintop — and from here we can survey both how far we’ve come and the 40-day Lenten journey ahead.”¹

I have been thinking a lot about how far we have come since Epiphany Sunday on January 5 and how far we have to go for the journey ahead in Lent, which begins this week on Ash Wednesday. For us here in Michigan, this season of the year can be brutal – cold and snowy, dark and dreary and gray. It can feel never ending. And this year has felt particularly heavy, with concerns about our newest refugee neighbors, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, economic uncertainty tied to job losses and tariffs, decreased funding for research and closure of university programs. There is much weighing us down, hard days ahead and we need to turn our faces toward that, just as Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem to face the walk to the cross. And yet, as we hear in in our scripture this morning, Jesus takes a moment to pause and pray and sit in God’s glory. This is something I think we are asked to do as well, in this season of the church year, in this season of life, in this season of the chaos. To sit in God’s glory before we turn ourselves to the task ahead.

In addition to his disciples, Peter, James and John, Jesus is joined by two well-beloved figures from the Hebrew scriptures Moses and Elijah. On Friday night, the confirmation class, mentors and some parents attended the Shabbat service Congregation Shaarey Zedek. Rabbi Amy reminded us that the scriptures Jesus and his disciples knew were the Hebrew scriptures, including the Torah, the first five books of what we Christians call the Old Testament and the writings of the prophets. The stories of Moses and Elijah would have been extremely familiar to the disciples.

We heard Alex read a passage from the book of Exodus about Moses face shining brightly as he was in the presence of God, receiving the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Not only did Moses intercede with God on behalf of the Hebrew people, Moses was also a liberator of the people, freeing them from enslavement in Egypt.

Elijah also appeared in glory with Moses, his face shining brightly. Elijah was a prophet in the days of the 9th century BCE King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Elijah had a tough job – trying to convince Ahab and the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that they need to worship the one Lord God and not the small gods of the Canaanite deity Baal. Elijah defeated these small gods, while also feeding, healing and bringing the word to the people. At the end of his work, Elijah passes on his mantle of prophesy to his successor Elisha. And Elijah is whisked off to

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/26/transfiguration-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-8>

heaven... with a chariot of fire leading him as he ascends in a whirlwind into heaven. In Hebrew scripture and tradition, the return of Elijah was thought to signal the on-coming “end of the age.”

The Gospel writer Luke tells us: “They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which Jesus was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.” The end of the age indeed. And how did the disciples who were with Jesus respond to this scene of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah shining in the light of glory? Well, this is how a meme shared in one of my clergy groups puts it: Peter begins that time honored church tradition: facing an existential threat (the glory of the Lord), he proposes a building project.

Poor Peter – he thinks he has a brilliant idea – sent up tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah and then a cloud overshadows them, they hear a voice from heaven saying “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*” And Jesus is left standing alone, not because he is eclipsing the work of Moses and Elijah, but rather that he is carrying on and culminating their work. The work of Elijah and Moses will be completed, will be fulfilled by Jesus. The gospel writer Luke tells us that the disciples kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Can you imagine keeping that a secret? These three disciples have been on the mountain top with Jesus, they have seen with their very eyes Moses, the liberator of their people, the one who saw God face to face, receiving the law; they have seen the great prophet Elijah, who heard God in the sound of sheer silence and who ascended into heaven in a whirlwind. And they don’t say anything to anyone about this, at least not at this time. They didn’t yet understand. Nor do we. As the Rev. Celeste Kennel-Shank comments: Peter, James, and John are all of us. She says, “Even in a moment of intense connection with the Divine, we still know only in part. ... Our moments of deeper understanding are as brief as illumination from forks of lightning in a storm, surrounded by a cumulonimbus shroud. ... The disciples do not yet understand—maybe none of us can ever truly understand—the risks when we choose the way of Jesus. Especially now, when there is much strife within the body of Christ, when those we may consider our antagonists are reading the same scriptures and singing the same hymns. We may lack certainty that ours is the one right way. Yet we can continue to seek the God we have encountered, through a veil, through a cloud. And sometimes we’ll see glimpses of glory.”²

And sometimes we will see glimpses of glory... as we head into the season of Lent, this is our challenge. How do we absorb what lies ahead for Jesus? How do we comprehend his teaching that he shared just before this story of the Transfiguration – that he must suffer, die, and rise again — and that anyone who wishes to follow him must “deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him. The journey we take to the cross, a journey lit by the glowing face of Jesus, is not an easy journey. Even in the joyous, raucous, celebratory moments of Mardi Gras

² Celeste Kennel-Shank. March 2, Transfiguration (Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, (37-43a)) Peter, James, and John are all of us. *Christian Century*, March 2025. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-2-transfiguration-exodus-34-29-35-2-corinthians-3-12-4-2-luke-9-28-36-37-43a?>

parades, we recognize that hidden in the traditions and rituals is a foreshadowing of the parade that leads to the cross – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – palm branches waving. The adoration of the humble Jesus entering Jerusalem on the donkey becomes the mocking and death of Christ the King.

Last week in her education session on the musical history of Mardi Gras, Arlene shared about the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians. Historians trace this tribal tradition to the days of French and Spanish rule, when those who were enslaved would gather at Congo Square in New Orleans to play traditional African folk music and dance and celebrate their heritage. Part of the tradition was for a “spy boy” or scout to march ahead of his tribe along the parade route, acting as lookout, while the flag boy walked between the spy boy and the big chief, relaying messages between the two and—as the name suggests—carrying the tribe’s flag.³ The spy boy helped to protect the flag from being set on fire, like we heard in the song “Iko, Iko.” While the parades are joy-filled, historically there has also been an edge to them, a reminder of the dangers that existed for these individuals in their everyday lives. The singing and dancing and the cheers from the parade-watchers, the mountain-top experiences, faded away after Mardi Gras when the Indians, people of color, returned to the valley of discrimination and bias, of unequal opportunity, of injustice.

This is tension we sit in as we get ready to face the Lenten season. We have climbed up through stories of Jesus birth and baptism, and his healing and liberating ministry. And now we begin descent down to Jerusalem. We celebrate Jesus, the Messiah, gentle and mild, lying in the manger; paid homage by shepherds and magi. We celebrate Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one, full of potential to avenge the wrongs of the world. And we walk the path to the cross and weep with the one is unjustly condemned, tortured and killed so that we may know true freedom.

Who is Jesus? He is the beloved son of God and the one who was **chosen** to bring the good news of the gospel to all people. We are all beloved and there is nothing – not a thing- we can do separate ourselves from the love of God. And because we are all beloved, Jesus came to teach us than his ministry is our ministry. We too, are chosen. Then, now, and always we are to love our neighbor, whether that neighbor lives next store or in a place we have never heard of or lives a lifestyle different than ours. We are to pray for our enemies – yes pray for them sincerely, not snarkily. We are to heal the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry regardless of where they came from. We are to forgive those who have wronged us, and not keep score. This is who Jesus is and this who we are called to be after Jesus’ death, when we, the church become the Body of Christ. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*” These are our marching orders as we begin the journey to the cross. May it be so.

³ Bret Love. These are the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans. *National Geographic*. March 9, 2016. Online at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/the-secret-history-of-new-orleans-mardi-gras-indians-super-sunday-saint-josephs-day>