

His Exodus from Jerusalem

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Luke 9:31

“They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.”

No one reads this story of the Transfiguration without thinking it a little odd. My mind wants to understand it as it would an algebra equation, but it is not like that. Here was Jesus speaking to two ancient Hebrews, both dead for at least 1000 years. The first was Moses, the leader of the Exodus and author of the Torah. Elijah also was there on the mountain with Jesus and the three disciples. Elijah the prophet was very much associated with the coming of the Messiah. The three disciples were sleepy so we could write the story off as a dream,¹ but Luke tells us ‘*since they stayed awake, they saw his glory.*’ Jesus’ face shone, not unlike Moses’ did after Moses met God on Mt. Sinai.² A cloud covered the mountain—also reminiscent of Mt Sinai and the Exodus.³ Then the three disciples heard a voice, very similar to the one heard at Jesus’ baptism. “*This is my Chosen; listen to him!*”⁴ Jesus was not just another prophet. They were to listen and obey him.

One verse in the text, however, jumped out at me. It concerns the vision of Jesus’ discussion with Moses and Elijah. The wording is as unusual as the account itself: “They appeared in glory and were speaking of [Jesus’] departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”⁵ Jesus, Moses and Elijah ‘appeared *in glory*’ and ‘were speaking of his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.’ It was such an odd verse I looked it up in Greek and there it is. The word translated *departure* in the NRSV is literally *exodus* (εξοδus). That set me to looking up the word. Was *exodus* a Hebrew word transliterated into the Greek text? Or a Greek word? In the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the name of the second book of the Torah is really *Shimot* which means ‘names,’ because the book begins, “These are the names...” Exodus, the name we associate with the book came from the Greek translation⁶ of the Old Testament which was common in the First Century. Since Luke was a Greek, if he did read the Hebrew Scriptures it would have been in that translation. Of course, *exodus* does mean

¹ Luke 9:32.

² Exodus 34:29-35.

³ Exodus 24:12-18. The parallels are striking: Moses, the voice, cloud, mountain.

⁴ Luke 3:22.

⁵ Luke 3:31.

⁶ The Septuagint.

departure, but it cannot be a coincidence that Luke used that particular word to allude to the crucifixion. *Exodus* is a word packed with double meanings.

Just before this passage in Luke is the confession by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah.⁷ Following the confession, Jesus instructed the disciples that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected...and be killed, and on the third day arise.”⁸ This is the first Passion prediction. In Matthew’s telling, Peter rejected the connection between Jesus’ being the Messiah and the necessity of his suffering.⁹ Though not mentioned by Luke, we must assume the prediction of his suffering and death must have initially sounded an odd note to the twelve. After all, the cross still strikes many of us as strange, too. After that exchange with the disciples, Luke tells the story of the Transfiguration. And here Luke alludes to a connection between the cross and the Exodus.

Did Luke make this connection intentionally? The talk of death pervades Exodus, that most Jewish of stories, too. In Exodus, during the Passover miracle, death came to all the first born sons of Egypt but passed over the first born of Israel. It was the miracle that freed the Israelites and brought them into their home land and made them a people. The cross, though odd sounding to those who expected a triumphant king-Messiah, contains many similar symbols as that early Jewish story of redemption. I read the Transfiguration story to be about the unknown, the greatest dark mystery: death. And the way Jesus’ death will lead to a new Exodus.

Throughout the Transfiguration story, God is the primary actor—the others (and we) are merely witnesses. What did they witness? What they saw was clouded in mystery, like death itself. How could they talk about what they saw? Did they even see it? Or was it a dream? “*Who will believe us?*” Peter must have wondered with James and John. Peter’s strange offer to build booths reads to us as arising from befuddlement. But booths are still built by our Jewish neighbors in the fall to remind them of the days of the Exodus when they lived in tents in the wilderness for 40 years, totally dependent on God for survival. Perhaps Peter saw the Exodus connection. Luke intended that his readers be reminded that the cross and our Christian community are another Exodus that leads us out of the bondage of sin, into the promised land of God’s grace.

Though the Transfiguration story is cloaked in mystery, there are hints that may help us grasp the edges of its meanings. As always we Christians need to look for the Jewish clues, for that is the world of Jesus and his twelve. That said, it is still an odd story. Can we live without knowing everything with utmost clarity? I have once or twice in my life had numinous experiences that I attribute to God. In retrospect, God seemed to be trying to get a message to me

⁷ Luke 9:18-20.

⁸ Luke 9:22.

⁹ Matthew 16:22.

about my life or vocation. It is always easy to say, "*Did that really happen?*" These three disciples must have puzzled over what they saw on that mountain. Not just as they walked down, but later, too, after a few months when Jesus made his exodus in Jerusalem. There seemed then more sense to the mystery, perhaps even a plan, a pattern. And after the resurrection, did some of them also say, "*Did that really happen?*" There is something here beyond reason, at its core a mystery.

What about you? How do you respond to that voice: "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.*"

End

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