

March 2, 2025 Luke 9:28-36 Transfiguration and Spiritual Formation

Jesus reveals his true self. He is not transformed or formed. His inner reality is made visible to the three disciples he take with him when he prays. This event is related in all three synoptic Gospels, with slight differences and emphases. (Mark 9:2-8- beloved; Luke-chosen; Matthew 17:6,7; 6 v 8 days, timing, order of disciples' names; only Luke says glory)

Luke's story of Jesus is marked by three numinous events, events that come from beyond the natural world. At the baptism, a voice speaks from heaven accompanied by a dove coming down. Here, he shines with an inner glory and a voice draws attention to the centrality of him and what he is going to do in Jerusalem in death. Finally, at the end of the Gospel, Christ reveals himself, transformed by suffering and death and the resurrection.

What we are learning in Luke is that the story transcends what we can see and touch, but that it is just as real as the material world. The material world is infused with the reality of the spiritual. (Pantheism-God is in the natural world, not as creator but dwelling in everything)

Jesus in prayer in the mountain immediately reminds us of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Moses's face also shines when he speaks with God as mediator. Sure enough, Moses is one of the figures who appear with Christ. We are also meant to think of Elijah driven by Jezebel's threats to run in the Spirit to Horeb, thought to also be Sinai, where he experiences the special presence of God, and there Elijah also appears. Clouds, a shining countenance in the presence of God, fear and awe, these are characteristics of God's revelation of Himself. These two had non-standard experiences with death and burial, but probably represent the Law and the Prophets. If God was simply bringing back those who did not experience death, Enoch might also have been included.

There are some indications in the text of association with the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:29), and Peter blurts out the idea of keeping these three figures on the mountain in booths. But the two others fade, and the voice chooses Jesus Christ as the only voice of God. (Isaiah 42:1; Deuteronomy 18:15) The work that he will do in death is a work no one else can do.

We do not know if Jesus experienced these kinds of illuminations and companionship when he prayed alone. Here, the disciples are invited to see Christ as he truly is. This is similar to the way Christ appears to John on Patmos in Revelation 1.

This week, we are beginning a series on spiritual formation led by members of our congregation who believe that they have been invited away from daily life to see Christ in a way they usually

don't. The three disciples here are drowsy, in an altered consciousness, overtaken by the cloud which is God's presence, which when it departs leaves them in awe and fear.

You will remember that the worship service here at CCC begins with silence in the presence of God. This comes, I believe, from the experiences of Bud and your members with spiritual formation. Silence, waiting, being in God's presence, slows us down. This is the same principle of Yoga, which many people in the United States practice to slow down and center themselves.

Gnosticism is secret knowledge only available to the elite. Gnosticism teaches that only the spiritual is real, and the material must fall away. This seems related to the experience of the Transformation, but historic Christianity is quite different. Christ actually became a man with a physical body and human reality, and was also God, holding both natures together. The Transfiguration allowed the divine to shine out of the human Christ.

One commentator (Bovon, p. 381) quotes John of Damascus (7th c). "Christ was transfigured, not by taking what he was not, but by revealing to his companions,, the disciples, what he was, by opening their eyes and causing the blind to see."

You won't think, will you, that spiritual formation will draw out of you what is divine, that you will learn to shine like Christ did on the mountain. We will not become the God-Man through spiritual training. Peter will go on to deny Christ, despite what he saw, and the disciples will run away from the arrest and conviction of Christ, despite what they saw.

We will learn who we are, that is, creatures, mind, body, soul, in God's presence, when we set out to know God. We become aware of our inner life, learn to listen and to repent and to seek what God wants, which is goodness and beauty.

The disciplines of spiritual formation is only a part of what God does in our lives. It is not a product we consume. If you have enough suffering in your life and you are crying out to God, that is where your spiritual formation will take place. As I mentioned two weeks ago, a person who does manual work all day may not need to go to a membership gym. The idea of spiritual formation is to take God and yourself seriously and choose to pursue everything you can experience of God.

The disciplines of spiritual formation are individual but also within a community. Along with taking God and yourself seriously, you will learn to trust other members of your community with your spiritual life.

Spiritual formation will address your relationships with other people, but there is a way that this type of inward training makes us blind to ourselves and to what is actually happening with other people. We can be constantly interpreting and living within our own thoughts and truly have no idea of all we are missing around us, in a way that isolates us from others just as we think we have insights into the reality.

There is also the tendency to begin to see oneself as having attained a level of spiritual fluency that exceeds that of other people. People need to have the freedom to take time off work and participate in special programs to pursue these experiences, but those pressed by suffering and loss may also be in God's program.

The idea that we can understand the principles of spiritual formation and practice it is also deceiving, in that as we pass through spiritual formation, we know less and less rather than more. God dwells in a cloud, and thinking that we have figure it out is the step before having the answers stripped away by God. (Clouds: Ex 13:21-22 wilderness, 33:9,10 God's presence made visible; 1 Kings 8:10 presence in temple)

There are different personalities, different paths, different callings as we get to know God.

Climb higher, go deeper, get closer, grow stronger, be purified, trust more fully. There are many pictures of spiritual life in the Bible. The Transfiguration is something different, something for Christ the God-Man whom we worship. Spiritual formation is making what we learn of God central to our lives.

2 Peter 1:17

Moses Exodus 24, 34:29-35

Elijah 1 Kings 19:4-8; Exodus 3:1; Deuteronomy 1:2, 5:2