

Exodus 34: 29 - 35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2

Luke 9:28 - 36 (37 - 43)

### **Transfiguration Sunday**

Moses is the common theme running through all four passages in this Sunday's readings. The Old Testament passage describes how, when he descended Mount Sinai with the tablets of the covenant, Moses' face shone. From this point forward, Moses would wear a veil among the Hebrews, only removing it when he would go to meet with God. The Psalter reading lists Moses and Aaron as priests of God while the 2 Corinthians text uses Moses' veil as a metaphor. Finally, Moses appears along with Elijah talking to Jesus at his Transfiguration.

### **Notes on the Epistle Lesson**

One of Paul's greatest heartbreaks - and one of the greatest challenges to his theology - was the fact that for the most part, the Jewish people had rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Although he deals with this problem more fully in Romans 9 - 11, he considers it in this passage as well. Paul compares the veil that shielded Moses' face from the people with a veil that prevented them from seeing God's presence in Jesus. Only through faith in Jesus as the Messiah could that veil be removed. Those from whom the veil has been removed can see "the glory of the Lord as if reflected in a mirror". Remember that the phrase, "the glory of the Lord" refers to the physical presence of God. Those freed by Jesus the Messiah see God's presence reflected in him.

### **Notes on the Gospel Lesson**

The Transfiguration took place in the days following the climatic conversation at Caesarea Philippi ("Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Christ, the son of God."). It is to this event that the reference in this week's passage refers ("about eight days after all these sayings").

It is somewhat curious that Jesus took only these three disciples with him for this encounter. Although most people assume that Peter, John, and James were the "inner circle" among the disciples, there are only four occasions in the gospels where this particular group is singled out: the healing of Jairus' daughter, the Transfiguration, a conversation on the Mount of Olives where Jesus is asked more details about the destruction of the Temple, and in Gethsemane prior to Jesus' arrest. While it is significant that these three accompanied Jesus for these events, their status in contrast to the other nine disciples should not be overstated.

None of the gospels name the mountain on which the Transfiguration occurred. While tradition has placed this event on Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley southwest of the Sea of Galilee, that identification is almost certainly incorrect. It is far more likely that this event took place on Mt. Hermon, the northern-most mountain in the land of Israel. Standing at 9230 feet, the impressive peak is snow-capped throughout the year and on a clear day is easily visible from as far away as the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Hermon while the next identified location in the gospel narrative is Bethsaida which is also in the country's north. Although not impossible, it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have traveled from the extreme north to Mount

Tabor on the southern edge of Galilee in a week and then hurried back to the north to visit Bethsaida. It is far more likely that the Transfiguration occurred somewhere on Hermon's heights.

Note the contrast between God's words at the Transfiguration and those spoken at Jesus' baptism. At the baptism, the words are from a Psalm used in the coronation of Judah's kings. At the Transfiguration, the words (from Isaiah 42) are a divine endorsement of Jesus' ministry and teachings.

It is curious that none of the gospel accounts describe the purpose of the Transfiguration. Only Luke gives us a hint, saying that Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about his "departure" (his death) which would occur in Jerusalem. For this reason, this passage is a most appropriate transition from Jesus' teaching in Galilee to his approaching Passion in Jerusalem - which we will observe in the coming weeks of the Lenten season.