

The Glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ

Exodus 34:29 – 36

Luke 9:28 – 36

Transfiguration Sunday

Fairview Presbyterian Church

February 14, 2009

On Time and Calendars

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.

Think with me about the function of calendars in our lives. A calendar is simply a way to organize the rhythms of our lives. A calendar provides a framework for organizing our days, our weeks, our months, and our years. Calendars are not self evident, however. God may have woven the seven day week into the fabric of creation, but how we organize the months and years, well, there is debate and disagreement about these matters. The Jews follow their calendar. Muslims have another. Our modern calendar in the west is based upon Christian calculations, but it is rapidly being secularized – the Christian elements being wiped from it. “**B.C.**” stood for “*Before Christ.*” Modern secularists now speak of “**B.C.E.**” – “*Before the Common Era.*” “**A.D.**” – “**Anno Domine**” – Latin for “*in the year of our Lord*” is now replaced by “**C.E.**” – “*Common Era.*” People debate and disagree over these matters; as well they should, for a calendar represents the most basic way in which we order our common life together.

Did you know that the Amish keep “*Amish Time*” – as opposed to “*English Time,*” the time for the rest of us? Amish set their clocks and watches one half hour ahead or behind the time of the rest of the world. Why? The time difference reminds the Amish that they are distinct from and separated from the world. They do not live or abide by the standards of the wider world. They are a separate, set apart community.

We can learn something from the example of the Amish. We in the church have been given a great legacy in the tradition of the **Church Calendar**. Recently I was told by a long term member of Fairview Presbyterian Church that I emphasize the reality of the church calendar more than any previous pastor of this church. One reason why I emphasize following the church calendar is because it provides a coherent center to the organizing of our spiritual lives. Think about it: if you have children enrolled in government schools, you know the school calendar. It provides the framework by which you plan holidays and vacations, children’s activities and sporting events. These things are governed by the dictates of the school calendar. They provide the framework for how you organize your family life. I want to suggest that following the Church Calendar is an important element for structuring our spiritual lives. Many people know this intuitively. They follow the church calendar in regards to the two great feasts of the church year: Christmas and Easter. Think of all the additional folk who show up in worship on those two holy days. This past week we put up a new sign out front

declaring that “*We are open between Christmas and Easter.*” The message is that there is more to cultivating our spiritual lives than what is found on these two days – important as they are.

Where are we in the church year? Today is **Transfiguration Sunday**, the last Sunday in the season of **Epiphany**. **Ash Wednesday** is this week, marking the beginning of Lent. Epiphany means “*revelation*” and its function in the church year is to remind us to focus upon the question, “*Who is Jesus of Nazareth?*” Epiphany ends with the story of the Transfiguration because it is one of the key events in Christ’s life marking clearly that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Word of God made human flesh.

My argument that we should structure and arrange our lives around the rhythm’s of the church year finds significant strength in the fact that a close reading of the gospels reveals that the story of Jesus of Nazareth’s life unfolds against the backdrop of the Jewish calendar.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth’s life unfolds against the backdrop of the Jewish calendar

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³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴

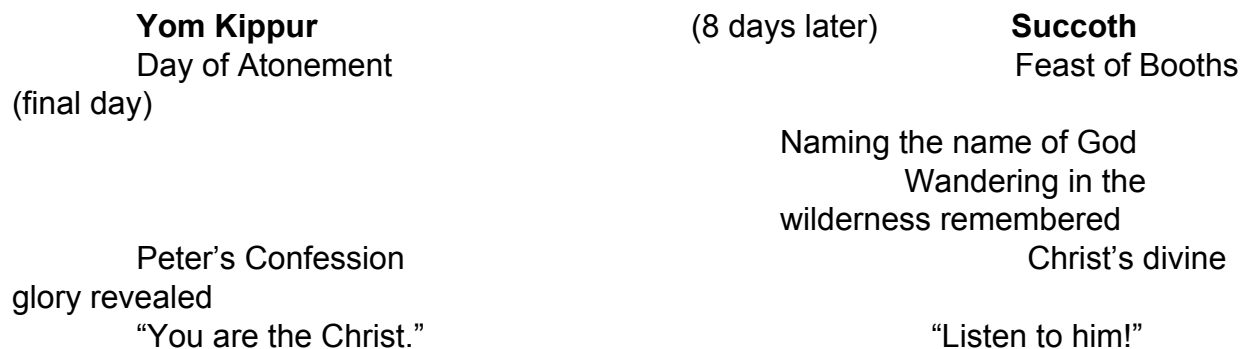
Jesus of Nazareth’s life, death, resurrection and ascension, unfold against the framework of the Jewish sacred calendar. The greatest expression of this is seen in his passion. Jesus Christ is the **Lamb of God**, the sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is condemned and sent to the cross at the same time as the lambs for the **Passover** feast are being sacrificed throughout the city of Jerusalem. Everything about the Passover feast points to and is fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. He is *the* Lamb of God.

Our passage today, on the Transfiguration, also unfolds against the background of the Jewish holy days. In v. 28 we are told the Transfiguration occurs about eight days after “*these sayings.*” What sayings are being referred to in this verse? The reference is to an earlier encounter between Jesus and his disciples when Jesus asks, “*Who do men say that I am?*” (See Luke 9:18 – 20). Peter replies, “*You are the Christ.*” In each of the synoptic gospels this confession of Peter’s represents a turning point in the story of Jesus. After this, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem. After this, the clock begins to tick, marching relentlessly forward towards Christ’s arrest, passion and crucifixion in Jerusalem.

The argument is technical, so I am not going to go into the details of how we know this, but it seems clear that Jesus asks this question, “*Who do men say that I am?*” on the holiest day of the Jewish year, **Yom Kippur**, the *Day of Atonement*.

Among the many unique actions performed on the Day of Atonement by the High Priest, one was the solemn pronouncement of the name of God. Ancient Jews and modern observant Jews to this day, do not normally name the name of God. The ancient Jews had a philosophy of *“building a fence”* around the law. What they intended was to increase the requirements of the law greater than what the law actually required. Being obedient to the fence would prevent even the accidental breaking of a commandment. The law required that we not take the name of the Lord God in vain. In practice, the fence built around this law was to refuse to name the name of God at all. Instead of speaking God’s name, a pious Jew would say, *“Adonai,”* that is, *Lord*. This prohibition was strictly observed, so that the only time during the year when God’s name would be named would be during the holy sacrifices and prayers of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Against this background we see the significance of Peter’s confession. Jesus asks, *“Who am I?”* Peter names his name, *“You are the Christ.”* It is on the Day of Atonement that Jesus of Nazareth is identified as the Messiah, the anointed one, sent by God to redeem the world. Peter speaks the truth; Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. All three synoptic gospels link Peter’s confession with the story of the transfiguration. In diagram form, what happens literarily looks like this.



We are told that the Transfiguration took place eight days after Peter’s confession. Eight days after Yom Kippur is the concluding day of the Jewish Feast of Booths. Thus, we have two events with the apostle Peter prominent in both. Both events deal with the question of Jesus’ divinity. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, and eight days later, at the conclusion of the Feast of Booths, he, together with James and John, sees Jesus Christ revealed in his divine glory. One purpose of the Transfiguration is to declare that the time of the Messiah has arrived.

The Feast of Booths is tied to the story of the Jew’s wandering in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years. During the Feast of Booths the Jewish people would move into a temporary structure for a week, living there and remembering the time of wandering. Think of it as a spiritually sanctioned excuse to go camping. If you would like a sense of how modern orthodox Jews celebrate The Feast of Booths (also known as

Succoth) rent the movie **Ushpizin**. It tells the story of a poor Hasidic couple in Jerusalem who pray for guests to come to complete their celebration of the holiday. The movie is subtitled and there is much about it that you will find surprising and foreign, but if you are interested in how this holiday continues in the modern world, it will give you a taste.

In the scriptures, God reveals truths we need to know on the mountain top

²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.

Jesus leads the disciples to the top of a mountain to pray. Here, on the mountain top, the Transfiguration takes place. The Transfiguration is a prayer event. This is what happens as Jesus speaks with the Father in prayer: Jesus Christ is revealed in his fullness. We confess that Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate. He is God in human flesh. In some mysterious way, the second person of the Trinity takes on human flesh, becoming one of us. One of the realities of the incarnation is the veiling of Christ's divine nature. God is holy. God is full of glory. God is majestic. In taking on human form and flesh, certain aspects of Christ's divine nature are hidden, for a season. If you had been there in Bethlehem, if you had heard Jesus teach the Sermon on the Mount, you would have seen an ordinary human being. No hint of his divine nature would seep out. His divine nature was hidden from view.

In the Transfiguration the veil is temporarily lifted. Jesus Christ shares with the Father the divine attribute of light. As Jesus talks to God in prayer, his inner reality, the light that is at the core of his being, the light from light, is revealed. His face becomes like that of the sun. His clothes appear whiter than any human agency can make them.

Biblically, the mountain is a place where God chooses to reveal himself in special and specific ways. The mountain is a symbol of ascent, both inwardly and outwardly. The mountain is a place where God is seen to be closer, revealed more fully. The traditional site for the Transfiguration is that of **Mt. Tabor**. But Mt. Tabor is only one of many symbolic mountains where God is revealed to his people. **Mt. Sinai** may be the greatest Old Testament example. It is here that Moses receives his commission from God speaking out of the **Burning Bush**. It is here that God's presence is revealed and the **Ten Commandments** are given. It was upon **Mt. Moriah** that Abraham is given the promise that God himself "*will provide the lamb*" of sacrifice. **Mt. Zion** is the place of God's blessing and presence in Jerusalem. Jesus prays in Gethsemane on the **Mt. of Olives**. He is crucified on **Mt. Calvary**, outside the city gates. God reveals himself, his divine action, upon the mountain top.

What is revealed in the Transfiguration? One key truth given is that the Old Testament message of the law and the prophets find fulfillment in Christ.

The Old Testament message of the law and prophets finds fulfillment in Christ

³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

In the Transfiguration we see a collapsing of the barrier between the seen and the unseen world, between the world of spirit and the material world in which we live. Jesus converses with two of the heroes of the Old Testament: Moses and Elijah. Out of all the Old Testament figures, why is it that it is these two with whom Jesus speaks? Why Moses and Elijah and not David and Samson? The question as to why Moses is easily answered. Moses is the greatest Old Testament figure. No other figure in the Old Testament story approaches his importance for the people of Israel. It is Moses who ascends Mt. Sinai and meets with God. It is Moses who returns from the mountain carrying the tablets of the Law of God. Here we see why Moses is present: he symbolizes the giving of God's Law. Moses represents the Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments, but revealed in fullness in the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. Elijah, on the other hand, is the greatest and most dramatic of the Old Testament prophets. The presence of Moses and Elijah together symbolize the entirety of the Old Testament message: they are symbols of the **Law** and the **Prophets**. Their presence, with Christ, on the mount of Transfiguration tells us that the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament find their meaning and fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. It is to Christ that the Law and the Prophets point. Christ fulfills the law and the prophets.

These two towering figures from the Old Testament meet Jesus of Nazareth on the mount of Transfiguration and they carry on a conversation. What did they talk about? Only Luke's gospel tells us, though in fact there would be only one topic that would be worthy of discussion at such a unique moment of revelation: and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. They spoke of Jesus' *departure*. This, of course, is a euphemism for his coming death in Jerusalem. Some argue that the word should be translated *exodus*. Moses and Elijah share in common that they each had unusual *departures*. Together the three of them now speak of Christ's coming sacrifice in Jerusalem, his death, his departure, his exodus.

Remember, Moses and Elijah had a stake in what was about to happen in Jerusalem. In space and time Christ would offer himself as the perfect **Lamb of God**. The figures of the Old Testament looked forward to the promised day of the redeemer. In our age, we look backwards in history, remembering the coming of the redeemer. Whether in prospect or in retrospect, all of the redeemed are dependent upon the reality of what Jesus of Nazareth would accomplish in Jerusalem. The salvation of God's people depended upon it. It is natural and to be expected that this would be the primary subject of conversation.

A significant spiritual truth is revealed in the Transfiguration in contrast to Moses' experience in God's presence. What we learn is this: God's people can reflect God's glory, but only Christ is God's word made flesh.

God's people can reflect God's glory, but only Christ is God's word made flesh

Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.

Some folk are always tanned: think of the actor **George Hamilton** or the **President of Grove City College, Dick Jewel**. I do not know how he does it, but Dick Jewel always has a pronounced tan. At a Grove City alumni event at the famous Philadelphia restaurant, **Bookbinders**, the owner teased President Jewel; "*Somebody get this guy some sun block.*" A tan is a reflection of having spent time in the sun.

Moses received the Law, the word of God, directly from God. Moses spent time in God's presence in a manner that was unique. The time spent by Moses on the mountain in God's presence had a surprising side effect: when he returned down to the base of the mountain, his face glowed. Moses countenance reflected the glory of God, in much the same way that the moon reflects the rays of the sun. (As an aside, in some early Christian art you may see Moses depicted as having horns growing from his head. This is a result of mistranslating "*glow*" for "*horn*." Many of the early artists suspected something was amiss, for it is not uncommon for Moses to be depicted with horns that are glowing!)

Moses, after returning from God's presence, would wear a veil over his face, so that the people would not see the fading reflected glory of God as it lessened and disappeared. Moses reflected God's glory, for a brief season. In contrast, on the mount of Transfiguration, the veil is temporarily removed from Jesus Christ, permitting his true celestial glory to shine forth. Moses is veiled to hide the fading glory. Jesus is veiled in the incarnation to hide his true glory. Spending time in God's presence, Moses reflects God's glory. In the Transfiguration, Jesus' inner reality, his divine identity, streams forth.

The presence of Moses and Elijah tells us that the Old Testament story is finding its fulfillment and climax in the person and work of Christ. Driving this truth home further is the arrival of a great cloud upon the mountain top, telling us that Jesus Christ's passion and sacrifice is his glory.

Jesus Christ's passion and sacrifice is his glory

³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.

What was it that made the Jews unique in the ancient world? It was the presence of God dwelling in their midst in a unique and special way. When the Jewish Tabernacle was dedicated, God's presence was revealed in a special way. A mysterious glowing cloud, the **Shekinah** glory, came and settled over the portion of the Tabernacle known as the **Holiest of Holies**. It was here, behind the dividing wall, the

veil, that God's presence resided in the midst of his people. God's presence was revealed in the Holiest of Holies, in the cloud of the Shekinah glory.

When Luke tells us that there, on the mountain top, a cloud came and overshadowed them, his intent is to point us to the Shekinah cloud that came upon the ancient Tabernacle. The Tabernacle revealed God's presence in the midst of his people. The arrival of the cloud after the Transfiguration tells us that God's presence is revealed and is made evident, in the person of Jesus Christ. God's presence dwells in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the holy tent over which God's presence dwells. This cloud tells us that, just as the Law and the Prophets point to the person of Christ, so too the Tabernacle and Temple point to Jesus of Nazareth. He is where God's presence uniquely dwells and where God's presence is to be found. The Tabernacle was the unique place of God's presence in the ancient world. Everything about the Tabernacle points forward to the coming Christ, to the coming of Jesus. John's gospel highlights this truth in its opening words. John 1:14 tells us, ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.^[1] The word becomes flesh and dwells in our midst. The word translated "*dwelt*" means literally "*to pitch a tent,*" – to tabernacle. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the ancient Jewish Tabernacle.

The Feast of Booths is also known as the Feast of Tabernacles. A tabernacle (small t) is a temporary dwelling place. The original Tabernacle (capital T) was a portable worship space. It served the Jewish people's spiritual needs until the permanent Temple was built in Jerusalem. After the Transfiguration, Peter, feeling overwhelmed by all that he had seen, proposes that they do what would be done during the Feast of Booths, and build three temporary tabernacles, one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Peter's response is natural and explainable, but his suggestion misses the mark entirely. The point of the Transfiguration that he and the others have observed is not to squeeze what has been revealed *into* the annual Feast of Booths celebration, but rather the opposite. The Jewish holiday of the Festival of Booths finds its completion and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the tabernacle to which the holiday points. He is its fulfillment.

All of this brings us to the question: "Okay, given what we read in the story of the Transfiguration, what is it that God expects of us?" Good question that. The answer: "Listen to the message of Christ."

What does God expect of us? "Listen to him."

³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" ³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

The reality of God's presence in the cloud is not left to chance or speculation. A voice speaks from this cloud to the three apostles. If we ask the question, "*What are we supposed to do with the knowledge of what is revealed in the Transfiguration?*" The

answer is clear. What does God expect of us? We are to listen to the words and message of Christ.

Moses received God's law. In turn, he gave it to the people of Israel to guide them and lead them. Jesus of Nazareth is God's Son. He is the Word of God. He is God's word to us. What should we do? We should listen to Jesus.

I wish to close this message by exploring a bit concretely what it means to *listen to Jesus*. Let me ask you, "*How well do you know the biblical text?*" "*How carefully are you listening to the Lord Christ?*" My sense is that the Bible is *America's favorite unopened text*. (Thank you, David Gibson.) Many in our modern world wish to say that they know and love Jesus Christ, but they rarely truly listen to him. They are unable to speak meaningfully about the content and message of the scriptures. The modern world has tended to replace doctrine (what Christ has taught and what we believe) with morality (what we are supposed to do). Modern folk want a *personal relationship* with Jesus, provided they do not have to listen and learn what the Lord Christ has actually taught. Against this attitude, we hear the words of God the Father spoken from the cloud, saying to us, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

How carefully are you listening?
Say "Amen" Somebody!

The Shining Face of Moses

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. ³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The Transfiguration

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make

three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”— not knowing what he said. ³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” ³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

[\[1\]](#) *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Jn 1:14). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.