

Passover Glory (11Feb18)
John 6:1-21

This Sunday before Ash Wednesday is celebrated in Lutheran churches as Transfiguration Sunday.

Transfiguration is a story that happens in the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—but not in John. In other years, that story gives a glimpse of Jesus on a mountaintop. I like to think of it as the premier mountaintop experience, because up there Jesus carries on some sort of mysterious conversation with Elijah and Moses, the two central figures embodying and summarizing the whole of Old Testament belief, the guys who definitely knew it all. Then Jesus is suddenly transfigured or metamorphosized (which is the actual Greek word in the stories) and his appearance totally changed. He and his clothes become dazzling shiny bright white and the voice of God echoes from a cloud, “This is my Son. Listen to him!” There couldn’t be a more guru-ish episode up there.

Within those other Gospels, the Transfiguration comes at a pivotal moment, a turning point in the story. Jesus begins to share that he will be betrayed, arrested, suffer, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. And so the Transfiguration is a little glimpse of resurrection dawn. Before Jesus gets swept up by hierarchies that are out to get him, before he is abused and abandoned, before death, before it all goes bad, we get to hold onto a hint of resurrection goodness and God’s glory.

Within the church calendar, that Transfiguration reading has stood in sort of a similar place. This Sunday has the last Alleluias before they go quiet for Lent (which is why we’re singing so many), making a hurrah before the more somber season, a festival before the fasting. This Sunday, with glorious Jesus in a visionary mountaintop experience, would be a dose of sustenance to carry us through Lent and keep us pointed toward Easter joy.

That happens in the other three Gospels. But today you didn’t get to hold in reservoir that shiny white hint of resurrection. The Gospel of John

doesn’t tell that. Today’s reading may seem the opposite of the Transfiguration, but still pointing to the death and resurrection of Jesus for us.

It isn’t only the Transfiguration that’s different in the Gospel of John. Almost the entire story is told differently. Though the end is remarkably similar, overall John is vastly unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John has different characters, like Nicodemus and the woman at the well, whom we’ve recently met, and dead Lazarus and his sisters whom we’ll meet later. Many of the little parables and teaching snippets from the other Gospels are absent in John, and a lot of the small details about his daily ministry.

In fact, today’s reading is among the very few accounts that John has similar to Matthew, Mark, and Luke and includes the only miracle stories told in all four gospels, in feeding the 5000 with the multiplication of bread and fish offered by a child, followed by getting away from the crowds and walking on stormy water.

Still, though these familiar stories cross all four Gospels, John tells them with some important distinctions.

First, I’ll invite you to notice that as Jesus is walking on water, he doesn’t calm the storm. In other versions, he rebukes the waves. He calls for peace. He even tells them to shut up. It’s often seen as another sign of his glory, that just as God spoke creation into being and the voice of God is a creative force, we hear that forceful word and creative potential in Jesus.

But not in John’s Gospel. In John’s Gospel Jesus walks through the waves, not interrupting the storm, but also not interrupted by it, not overcome by all that would batter him and his followers.

Some have suggested that his walking through the chaotic waves might recall the parting of the Red Sea, as Moses led the people out from slavery in Egypt, how gushing waters piled up on both sides and the people walked through the midst of them.

Besides looking back to old stories, in John’s Gospel, as the storm continues to rage and the fears of the disciples in the boat persist, we may

also suspect that instead of a Transfiguration glimmer of resurrection, what we get here foreshadows the crucifixion.

Another indicator of that comes with a note that John alone gives. He says that this happens at Passover.

That again connects to Moses. On the last night of slavery, as the Hebrew people waited for deliverance, lamb's blood marked them as freed from death. The Passover meal was a simple supper they were told to eat already dressed for the journey and with no time even for yeast to raise the bread. Instead they ate flatbread. So maybe in feeding the multitudes here, we notice that the people again eat special bread.

Or, maybe beyond Passover, for bread that surprisingly appears in the wilderness and is enough to feed everyone the correlation could be the magical manna that appeared each morning, the original biblical miracle of bread. After this, Jesus will talk directly about manna, in the reading we'll hear at Ash Wednesday worship.

But, again looking forward besides historically, the note of Passover is also important within the markers of John's Gospel itself. John includes three celebrations of Passover (which, incidentally, is how we date Jesus' ministry as lasting for three years).

We've already heard the first, as Passover when Jesus cleansed the temple. That's an interesting and important distinction in the Gospel of John. The other three put the cleansing of the temple in the last week of Jesus' life, for how the authorities finally view him as a disturber of the peace or of their place in the hierarchy and dangerous threat to society.

But John puts that story at the start, already in chapter 2. And for John, with that action in the temple already at the onset, Jesus is pointing toward his death. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he says. That was the first Passover in the Gospel. From then on, this Gospel points to the culminating crucifixion, toward Jesus' death.

And so it is that the *third* Passover is as Jesus is dying on the cross. He is slaughtered as the

Passover lamb, whose blood is marker and sign of deliverance as God frees the people from oppression. In dying, Jesus becomes the central element of that memorial meal of a renewed Passover.

Between those brackets, today is the middle Passover in John's telling. Just as the Transfiguration stands at a turning point in the other Gospels, a glimmer of glory, a mini resurrection appearance, so today this story stands as the mid-point, the turn, the crux that focuses us toward the cross.

John wants us to focus on this inevitable conclusion: Jesus is going to die. That is what he came to do. That is what accomplishes God's purpose. That is for the sake of your life. Where we might think it sad, John proclaims the death a triumph. If we wanted to point to Jesus as a victim, John declares him a victor, and you with him.

Whereas the other gospels and we ourselves might be inclined to say that death and suffering somehow separate us from God's glory and put at risk Alleluias that we claim are how God is glorified, John says it is precisely in death that we are delivered from death, in suffering that suffering is emptied of its power, in being overcome that you shall not be overcome, and in dying that you are born again to eternal life. That makes the shameful execution on the cross itself glorious. Even that death has been redeemed for what it accomplishes.

Jesus came to deliver you from death into life. Not only to take you to heaven, but already to begin living with his life now. This new Passover, this refreshed purpose of God to free you from your bondage, is not about eating a bite of bread, but about a God of liberty and freedom for you. That is what Jesus has brought about, what he has fulfilled.

For you to understand that of Jesus and trust in him is the purpose of John's story, the purpose we'll continue to reiterate and keep practicing during the season of Lent. That season isn't about feeling bad about yourself, but is being turned away again from what is old and rotten and being

renewed as God's good creation, to refocus that central core of abundant love, so that you may know you have life in Jesus, that you are released from what would confine your life, beginning eternity already now.

When you are stuck captive to the false life that nibbles on crumbs of bread and tries merely to get by and succumbs to the Empire and obsesses with pursuing your visions of brightness and fake glory, then you have been slaves enthralled to this world. Jesus died and rose to set you free from that bondage and give you life in his name. Abundant life. Not merely for a struggling sustenance, but for what can never be taken away, what never perishes, what could not be offered by Egypt or Rome or any alleged greatness, and which will not be overcome by any storms or even death itself. It is this life Jesus is renewing in you, leading you out of oppressive captivity to live in the Promised Land.

In Christ, you've passed over failure already into victory.

In Christ, you've passed over isolation already into the community of God's people.

In Christ, you've passed over storms already into peace.

In Christ, you've passed over domination making claims against you already into the liberty of unconditional acceptance.

In Christ, you've passed over sadness already into joy.

In Christ, you've passed over death already into life.

And in Christ, that Passover happens while the journey continues. Even while the failures and isolation and storms and domination and sadness and death persist, that glory is true: in Christ you have already won. That's why we sing Alleluia!

Hymn: *Hallelujah! We Sing Your Praises* (ELW 535)