**Crossings Text Study Group – All Are Welcome!**

**Wednesday Mornings at 9:30 A.M.**

**Martin Luther Lutheran Church, Milwaukee**

The Gospel reading for Transfiguration Sunday gives us the Transfiguration story proper (Lk 9:28-36), plus the option of adding to it the subsequent story of Jesus healing a man’s only son who is possessed by a spirit (Lk 9:37-43a.) While we could examine each one separately, I think there is value in looking at them as a couplet, especially on last Sunday after the Epiphany.

Taken together the texts provide a fuller “epiphany” of who Jesus is. For the identity of the Jesus who is revealed by the Word of his Father on the Mount of Transfiguration is demonstrated on the plain when he delivers a child from the possession of a spirit and gives him back to his father.

Of course, in the process, these two texts also reveal and demonstrate the weakness of Jesus own disciples: they fail to grasp the revelation given on the mountain and they fail to put it into practice on the plain. As Luke will tell/show us elsewhere that weakness will be overcome only by the Word taking root in our hearts by the planting of the Holy Spirit.

The text is filled with details that ooze with symbolism. First, there is the mountain. In Israel’s history mountains are not just landscape but, at times, “God-scapes,” places where God appears or makes himself know (epiphany). Second, there is Moses and Elijah. In Israel’ history they are not just two figures of the past, but emblems of God’s will, specifically, of the giving of the law and the impending consummation of the end. Third, we have Jesus’ change in appearance. He becomes “dazzling white,” which means his divinity or “glory” is showing. Now we know why Moses and Elijah are described as “appearing in glory,” a euphemism for “being in the presence of God.” For they are standing in the presence/glory of Jesus, who is the Son of God. Finally, Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus about his “departure” (literally, “exodus,” v. 31), which is a euphemism for his act of deliverance, his dying and rising for the salvation of the world. This is the meaning of the scene that Luke paints for us.

But the disciples don’t get it. This is symbolized in the story by their “sleepiness,” their inattentiveness to God’s revelation, and ultimately by their (actually Peter’s) speaking but “not knowing what he said.” That depicts not just ignorance, but defensiveness. The disciples are at this moment suddenly in jeopardy. By being overshadowed by the cloud they are put on the spot to respond to God’s revelation. In effect, they are like defendants in a courtroom. No wonder they are "terrified." If the only revelation of God is law, they are doomed.

Although what Peter said probably reflects the “best wisdom” of his contemporaries understanding of the messiah, it is simply wrong—deadly wrong. By saying, “Master… let us make three booths, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” he was theologically putting these three great figures in Israel’s history on the same plane or should I say “plain.” (Hopefully, the pun will become evident later.) He saw them as doing essentially the same thing: Prophets raised up by God to bring to bear on the realities of the world the law of God.

But on the Mount of transfiguration something different from law is being “revealed." And that we know from what God speaks from the cloud (in his majesty) concerning Jesus. First, Jesus is not a prophet; he is “my Son,” says God. Second, is he is “my Chosen,” i.e. distinct not only in person but function. “My chosen” is the term that Isaiah (in 42:1) uses to describe the “suffering servant” who will reconcile to God not just exiled Israel (exiled not just from the land but, because of sin, from God), but also the Gentiles. Of course, this idea of the suffering servant was an enigma to contemporary Israel – the disciples, too (see 9:21-22) -- that is now “revealed,” made clear, as referring to Jesus.

Therefore, third, the disciples are instructed to “listen to Jesus.” He is to be the central focus of God’s message/Word to the world, not Moses and Elijah and the law/judgment they revealed. That’s why the climax of the revelation happens at the end when Luke writes “”When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone” (v. 36). Jesus alone is God’s Word of hope for this sinful world and, as he has already been telling them, hope rests in his suffering for the sake of the world.

That’s the revelation on the mountain. Now down to the plain. A day later, after Jesus and the disciples had come down to the plain, Jesus is met by chaos. A man in a gathered crowd begs him to attend to the needs of his son who was possessed by an (epileptic) spirit. The crux of the problem was that the man had begged the disciples to cast out the spirit, “but they could not” (v. 40), even though Jesus had earlier gave them "authority" to do so (9:1). Jesus responds with a blanket indictment of the world, describing “this generation” as “faithless” and “perverse,” and lamenting about how long it will take for them to believe. For he had been proclaiming the kingdom to them tirelessly and yet they did not receive it.

But here is the point. Jesus does not give up on them. Even in the face of the unfaith of the crowd, he takes the man’s son, he rebukes the unclean spirit, and he gives the son back to the father. He demonstrates to them that he has come into the world to save it. This demonstration on the plain is just as much a “revelation” into who Jesus is as the theophany on the mountain.

Remember, one point of the revelation on the mountain was that Jesus is not a prophet of the law, though he recognizes its valid indictments, but the “chosen” suffering servant of God who, in spite of what the law says, has come to restore a rebellious, chaotic world back to God. That, too, is the revelation hidden in the healing of man’s son. Jesus is not a miracle worker, though miracles he did, but the One who has come into the world to deliver it from the clutches of unclean spirits (the power of sin) and return it back to the God from whom it is estranged/lost. (Being lost is Luke’s favorite image for the human condition, cf. Lk 15.) But the revelation on the plain also adds this: unclean spirits and the power of sin in alienating us from God also alienates us from one another. Therefore, the giving back of the son to the father also means that Jesus’ reconciliation works

also on human plane.

**Martin Luther Lutheran Church --**  9235 W. Bluemound Rd, Milwaukee, WI 53226

**Wednesdays -- 9:30-11 a.m.**

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I look forward to exploring the Scriptures with you together,

Peace,

Steve Kuhl

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