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Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
March 3, 2019

Lectionary Year C:  
Exodus 34:29-35  
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2  
Luke 9:28-43a  
Psalm 99

*The God who surprises*

Each year there is a conference on artificial intelligence that includes a Turing Test. The Turing Test is named after the computer scientist Alan Turing, who died in 1954. He made the prediction in 1950 that, by the year 2000, there would be computers advanced enough that a human judge could not differentiate between exchanging electronic messages with a computer or with an actual human, some significant amount of the time—one-third of the time was Turing’s goal.

At the AI contest each year, judges do just that: they exchange electronic message with either a real human or with a machine, but they aren’t told which it is. The goal is to see if the human judges can differentiate between the human conversation partner and the robot conversation partner. The programmer who designs the computer that can best pass for a human wins an award, the Loebner Prize. To this point, no one has been able to design a computer that could pass the Turing Test and the contest continues on.

For their part, ethicists suggest that one way of differentiating humans from non-humans is to say that humans can surprise you. Robots can surprise you, too: I think of those Amazon Alexas that have been known to chime into conversations unexpectedly. However, their surprises are “built in,” you might say. They’re just carrying out their programming in a way that is unexpected (and maybe a little bit disturbing).

Humans can surprise you. You may know someone for many years, and then one day they do something that knocks you back on your heels. Perhaps you have had this experience. A grumpy person shows an unexpected act of kindness; a gruff and unpleasant person is suddenly gentle in a needed moment. And vice versa, of course; surprises can go the other way, too.

These surprises can be even more surprising for those we know the best—our closest friends and relatives, perhaps. We may know someone like the back of our own hands, but people aren’t automatons. They have depths we don’t have access to.

Imagine this in the Palestine of the first century. Imagine Peter, James, and John. They are friends of Jesus. Granted, they weren’t friends like they were the Four Musketeers; they knew that one of these things was not like the others. St. Luke reminds us that this was “eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God.” Peter had acknowledged Jesus’ special status, unique among them, unique among all the peoples of the world: Jesus of Nazareth is the *only* Christ of God.

The word “Christ” means “Messiah”: to say Jesus is the Christ is to say that Jesus is the Messiah. But the word “Messiah,” by itself, does not imply glory; it certainly does not entail divinity. Peter—by God’s grace—had recognized that the God of Israel had Jesus of Nazareth as his anointed one, in a way that Peter had never seen before; indeed, in a way that no one had ever seen before. He was the chosen, the liberator; he was the one whom God had been promising through the prophets for generations and generations to set Israel free so that it would not be under the

domination of Babylon, or Egypt, or, in their case, Rome. That's not nothing. To know the Messiah would be, by itself, enough to change your life over.

But there was a surprise in store. The four friends went up on the mountain, by themselves. Jesus had just performed two amazing acts of healing, including raising Jairus' daughter. Their heads must have been spinning already. But up on the mountain, while Jesus was praying, his face changed. His clothes became "dazzling white." And there, standing among them, they saw two men, whom they somehow knew to be Moses and Elijah. The vision was glorious.

Something new happened on the mountain of transfiguration, something they had not expected, had not predicted. People have depths we don't know about. They can surprise you. Inside of their friend dwelt the glory of God; it shone round about them, and yes, maybe they were sore afraid (cf. Luke 2:9).

So they learned something else about Jesus that day. "Glory" is a loaded Biblical term; it means something like manifesting the presence of God in a pure and intense way. Glory is quite often something you can see and feel. When Moses builds the worship space for the Hebrews, as they are wandering through the wilderness, God's glory enters into the tabernacle as burning fire. And here, on the mountain of the transfiguration, Peter, James and John see that, somehow, Jesus participates in God's glory in a way that no one else ever has; somehow, he is part of that glory, even if they don't understand how. They find that there is a relationship between their friend Jesus and the God who created all things, that they hadn't known before.

The visible glory showed them the beauty and majesty of God, affirming for them that the glory they were seeing was indeed God's glory, not an imitation.

There is more for them personally. Since they're Jesus' friends, it means that *they* have a relationship with God that they didn't know before, through him. Through him, they could stand in the midst of God's glory, alongside Moses and Elijah. Through him, the living and the dead come together. Through him, the past, present and future are shown at one time. In Jesus, the temporal and the eternal meet, and Peter, James and John got to stand in that intersection. In the Transfiguration, life was shown to be stronger than death; shown by the one who has come to bring life and to bring it in abundance. There was a depth they did not imagine—a depth to Jesus and, indeed, a depth to the world. God was present, with them, in a way they did not expect. It was quite a surprise.

The story of the Transfiguration appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It clearly made a big impression on the disciples and those that followed them, as you could imagine it would. There would be more surprises to come for the disciples. I think that part of what we learn from these stories is that, with God, we can expect the unexpected.

This week we begin the season of Lent, which can be a journey into the heart of God, into the cross, into God's cruciform glory. To give us strength for the weeks ahead, and open us up to the possibilities of the season, it may be worth asking ourselves how God has surprised us in the past. When we look at the story of our lives, for example, where might we see the twists and turns where the presence of God is particularly evident—in retrospect, even if not at the time?

We might ask how God might be surprising us right now. What is happening in our lives where we see God at work, against our expectations?

We don't know, of course, how God might surprise us in the future; if we knew, then it wouldn't be a surprise. Instead we might ask, how open are we to the breaking in of something new? Are we open to being surprised?

Three friends accompanied their teacher up into the mountain to pray. In this season, we go with them. To the great surprise of Peter, James, and John, the world would never be the same for them again.