

“Transfiguration Sunday”
Luke 9. 18- 24, 28-36
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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Today is February 14, Valentine’s Day. According to the world’s calendar, it’s a day for exchanging cards, buying jewelry, sending flowers and candy – showing our loved ones how much we care about them by purchasing things they probably don’t need. But according to the church calendar, today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before we begin the journey of Lent on Ash Wednesday. And so instead of red hearts and passages on love, this morning we focus on the mysterious story of Jesus being transfigured on the mountain top. In the original language, transfigured literally means metamorphosis - Jesus is changed in his image when he reflects brightly the glory of God. We have dazzling light, an all-star gathering of biblical characters, and a divine voice coming out of the clouds! Hollywood could not have come up with a better cosmic drama than this one which is recorded in 3 out of the 4 of the gospels. So as people of faith, what are we to make of this amazing story?

First off, I think we must admit what we are dealing with here is mystery. Instead of trying to rationally explain what is going on in the story, we should acknowledge we are walking on holy ground. We may never know exactly what God’s voice sounded like, nor may we know how Jesus’ appearance changed? But instead of living with the mystery, many preachers have turned this experience into a lesson focused on the theme of mountain top experiences. You know - we all, from time to time, have experiences being on a spiritual high, a time when we have been away on a retreat or mission trip with a group or simply out in nature by ourselves – spiritual times when we have experienced God in profound ways. And though like Peter, we may want to preserve the moment by building some tents and thus trying to stay on the mountain top forever, the preacher usually reminds us that “there is work to be done down in the valley.” Though there is some truth in such an interpretation, I don’t think a faithful reading of this text from Luke’s gospel should lead us to think about the dangers of mountain top experiences. Instead, I think this passage is ultimately about Jesus, his identity, and the journey he travels on the way to the cross in Luke’s story. For as his followers, his journey has a lot to do with the journey we are to take during this upcoming season of Lent.

So let’s let’s take a closer look at Luke’s story here in chapter 9. In the beginning of our passage for today we have another important scene involving Jesus and his disciples. Similar in setting to the Transfiguration, Jesus is off by himself in prayer, with his disciples close by (9.18). And during this time of prayer Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them the famous question of identity. “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They give a bunch of possibilities: “Some say you are John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other ancient prophets brought back to life.” But Jesus is not content with this report of the crowd’s responses, so he presses the disciples further: “But who do YOU say that I am?” And like the kid in the class who is always the first to blurt out whatever is on his mind, Peter, makes his famous confession, “You are the Christ, the Messiah of God.” But instead of giving Peter a gold star for answering the question correctly, Jesus goes on for the first time to explain to them how he will have to undergo great suffering,

rejection and finally be killed before being raised on the 3rd day. And following this somber prediction, Jesus gives the disciples this job description of what it means to be one of his followers: “If anyone wants to be my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (9.23-24).

But here’s the deal: that was not exactly the kind of job description the disciples had in mind for themselves! Doing deeds of power, performing acts of healing, and ushering in the promised kingdom of the long-awaited Messiah – that was more of what they had in mind! But at this critical moment in the gospel, when Jesus seems to be wrestling with his identity, when he is explaining to his closest friends the nature of his mission, how he is going to have to suffer rejection and even death - at this crucial moment in the story it becomes abundantly clear that the disciples simply do not get it. A messiah who will have to suffer? Disciples who will have to follow his path of self-denial? And when later in the chapter Jesus predicts his suffering again in verse 44, we are told that his closest friends simply do not get it. Instead, a couple of verses later the disciples are found arguing over which one of them is the greatest (9.46).

So I believe it is in this context – the context of the disciples trying to come to grips with Jesus’ identity – it is here that we have to begin if we are to understand the meaning of the transfiguration of Jesus. According to Luke, the journey up the mountain begins only a week after Jesus has had this conversation with the disciples about his identity. Jesus goes up the mountain with his three friends to pray, and if you know anything about the Bible and geography you know that big things happen on mountain tops! Remember, Moses received the Ten Commandments on the mountain top, and when he returns down his face was shining because he had been talking with the Holy One of Israel, Yahweh. But guess who’s talking now? It’s Jesus with the two big-league hitters from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah having a conversation. And they are not talking about sports or the weather or the cloud that’s fast approaching – instead, they are talking about Jesus’ departure which was about to be accomplished in Jerusalem. The word translated as “departure” is literally in the Greek “*exodus*.” So when Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah they are discussing his upcoming *exodus* through rejection & suffering, death & resurrection, and finally his ascension. Just as God had worked through Moses to deliver the people from bondage through the exodus out of Egypt, now God was working through Jesus to accomplish liberation through another kind of exodus, one that involves his rejection, suffering and death.

It should come as no surprise that the sleepy disciples just don’t get it – the lead disciple Peter sees the moments of glory slipping away and so wants to capture it by constructing dwellings (Green, p. 383). Departure is not in his Messiah playbook, but preserving the glory of the moment certainly is!

But just at the moment he begins to talk, Peter is interrupted by no one less than God! As Peter is opening his mouth, a cloud comes and overshadows them. In the presence of the Holy One the disciples are rightly terrified, and a voice speaks from the cloud: “This is my son, the Chosen; listen to him!” Peter is to stop his babbling because God is the one who has the last word, and the word is this: “Jesus is the chosen one – be quiet, and listen to him!”

Now, if you remember we have heard this voice before in Luke's gospel, way back in chapter 3 when Jesus was baptized. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased" (3.22). Up until this point in the story the disciples have not been privy to this information, but now Jesus' identity has been confirmed for them. They have beheld his glory. They have seen him with the two pillars of the Old Testament - Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets – in this way we are assured that there is continuity between Jesus' mission and God's work in the past. The disciples are to listen to this one, and to trust that God's purposes are being worked out in this one who is ready to set his face to Jerusalem (9.51), the one ready to embark on the exodus of rejection, suffering – the journey to the cross.

You see, the transfiguration is a needed reminder to his disciples that the One whom they follow is indeed the chosen one of God. They are to listen to him and trust that his path of downward mobility – the way of suffering and denial, rejection and death - that this path is indeed God's way of liberation. And this is the path we are invited to follow as his disciples.

As we stand but a few days away from Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, we too may need this reminder. We live in a world that is oriented towards upward mobility, towards success at any-cost, a world that values the avoidance of suffering and self-denial. But Lent is an opportunity for us to go deeper spiritually, to become better disciples of the one who gave us the unusual job description "to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily" and follow him. Lent also offers us an opportunity to slow down, to really listen to God's Word, and to live in the mystery of God's presence. Instead of being like Peter who wants to talk about things he can do, like building the tents, we need to practice simply being in God's presence. Hopefully our Lent in Plain Sight study will give us a chance to do this each day.

In the next chapter in Luke's gospel will hear the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha (10.38-42). Martha is the one busy and distracted by many things, while sister Mary sits at the feet and listens to Jesus. Lent is an invitation to be more like Mary, to choose the better part of listening instead of doing. Don't get me wrong, our doing is important, our living out of the faith and sharing the love of God with our neighbors in our words and deeds. But our best doing should always be grounded in our being, in our relationship with God. If you have been paying attention to Luke's story we are told time and time again that Jesus goes off to pray - sometimes by himself, sometimes with his friends near. But even as God's chosen one he models for us the human need to stay connected to the Source of Love. In a world with many voices telling us we are what we do, we are what we have, or we are what others think of us, we must remain rooted in the voice of the One who calls us Beloved.

To God be all glory and power now and always. Amen.