



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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They saw his Glory

Luke 9:28-36

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August 30, 2014 – Trinity 11

This morning we're returning to Luke, Chapter 9 and we'll be looking at the account there of Jesus' Transfiguration. I had hoped to be able to preach on this passage the Sunday before I left, since the Feast of the Transfiguration was just two days after that, but it didn't work out. So here we are at Luke 9:28-36. But before we get into the text and since it's been almost a month, it's good to have a reminder of where we're at. Remember when we began Chapter 9, I said that this chapter focuses on two things. On one hand, it focuses our attention on the person of Jesus: who he is. And on the other hand, it also focuses our attention on discipleship: on what it means and looks like to follow Jesus. And what we see is that the two go hand in hand. If we want to know Jesus, we have to be his disciples—we have to follow him. At the same time, our discipleship deepens the more we know Jesus and who he is. As we follow Jesus we get to know him better and as we get to know him better, the more reason we have to trust—the stronger our faith becomes—which gives us reason to follow him more closely—and that, then, continues to deepen our knowledge of him, which deepens our walk even more.

It's easy to walk on the mountaintops with Jesus. It's easy to follow him when everything's

going well for us. It's not so easy to follow him down into the darkness of the deep valleys, but it gets easier the better we come to know Jesus and the better we learn to see the big picture. When we were immature in our faith and when we only knew Jesus a little, we wanted to stay on the mountaintop forever. And when we found ourselves down in the valley, walking in the darkness, we were prone to thinking that he had abandoned us. We lost the hope we had on the mountaintop. Our faith faltered and with it our obedience. But all that changed, little by little, as we came to know Jesus better and as we came to have a better idea of God's plan and the big picture of which we can only see a little part. It makes me think of an old hymn:

*When we walk with the Lord
In the light of his Word,
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and
obey.*

This morning as we walk in the light of God's Word, following him with Peter, John, and James up the Mount of Transfiguration we get a taste of the glory that Jesus "sheds on our way". It's a scene that reminds us of God's bigger plans. It's a reminder that even today's mountaintop experiences will one day pale in comparison to the glory of God's kingdom. And it's also a reminder that on our journey to the New Jerusalem, even the darkest valleys have their place alongside the highest mountaintops. No matter how high or how low, "he abides with us still" and that's all the reason we need to follow—to "trust and obey".

In the last part of Chapter 9 we heard Jesus ask his disciples who they thought he was. And in response Peter answered that Jesus was "The Christ of God"—Jesus was the Messiah God had promised to send to his people. Everyone knew that the Messiah was coming to vindicate his people. He was going to lead them to victory over their enemies and establish his kingdom once and for all. So, if you put yourself in the disciples' shoes, what Jesus said next was very strange. Yes, he was the Messiah. But because he's the Messiah, he's going to "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22). That's not what people expected of the Messiah. But the strangeness didn't end there. He went on to address his disciples, telling them that they needed to take up their crosses and follow him. They had to be ready to follow him as he faced rejection and death. In fact, he said, being willing to lose one's life for his sake was the only way to be part of his kingdom.

Jesus had figured out that this was his mission as he realised who he was. He was the Messiah, the Davidic king who would restore the kingdom; but he was *also* the Son of Man, Israel's representative; *and* Isaiah's Suffering Servant, who would bear the sins of the people. The Messiah was to be King, but the way to victory and the way to his throne was by embodying Israel himself and suffering as the servant of his people. But the disciples hadn't connected these dots yet. This was mind-boggling to them. But they were still committed to following Jesus. They had seen God working

through him. In verse 28 Luke jumps ahead, telling us specifically that the next events happened eight days later. That ties these two passages together. What now follows has everything to do with Jesus' revelation as the Messiah, as the Son of Man, and as the Suffering Servant and it also has everything to do with his call to his disciples to take up their crosses and to follow him even when it might mean death. Luke writes:

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

This isn't the first time Jesus singles out Peter, John, and James. They were the same three disciples he took into the house with him back in 8:51 when he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. In Acts Jesus will single out Peter and John as the leaders of the apostles. And now he takes them up a mountain to pray. None of the evangelists tells us the name of the mountain. Some of the Church Fathers tell us that it was Mt. Tabor, just a short distance from Nazareth. Some modern scholars think it was Mt. Hermon based on Mark's Gospel telling us the mountain was near Caesarea Philippi. Whichever it was, Jesus went there to *pray*. That's important. Luke doesn't say what Jesus was praying about, but since he connects this passage with the last passage, we can safely assume that Jesus was praying about his mission and ministry—praying about his coming rejection and death and maybe praying for his disciples, that they would have the faith to follow him through all that was to come. And it's in the midst of this prayer that God reveals himself. The same thing

happened at Jesus' baptism. It was in baptism that he committed himself to his ministry as Messiah and as he prayed, Luke tells us, "the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' (Luke 3:22)" Jesus had committed himself to his mission and as he prayed, the Father and the Spirit confirmed him in that mission. Look now at verses 29-31. Something very similar happens here as Jesus prays on the mountain.

And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Two things happen. First, Jesus' appearance, his face, his countenance, his clothes change. Everything about him becomes dazzlingly white. Think of it as if Jesus has been turned spiritually inside-out for the benefit of his disciples. In the Old Testament a person's countenance was considered to be a mirror showing his or her heart and manifesting his or her relationship with the Lord—we'd say the condition of their spirit and their closeness to God. The disciples would, no doubt, have been having trouble taking in the crazy things Jesus had said. "Yes, I'm the Messiah and now, because of that, I have to be rejected and die." Was he really the Messiah? Was he really God's representative? Here's the proof straight from God. The Father

manifested himself at Jesus' baptism to confirm him in his ministry and now, as Jesus calls his disciples to follow him to rejection and death, the Father manifests himself again to confirm for the disciples that Jesus isn't crazy and that he hasn't got it all wrong.

The second thing that happens is that Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Again, this is also for the disciples' benefit. Luke says, "Behold!" or "Look!" And Moses and Elijah were, he says, in "glory"—the Greek word is the one from which we get our word "doxology" and here it refers to their being bright and dazzling, just as Jesus was. But they're not just standing there, the disciples realise that Jesus is talking with them about his departure to take place at Jerusalem.

This is what he was referring to in the last section when he told the disciples that he was going to be rejected and executed by the Jewish elders and chief priests. That could obviously only happen at Jerusalem. And that he's talking about it with Moses, the lawgiver, and with Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, confirms for the disciples that this is all part of God's plan for the Messiah. It's not crazy after all, no matter how much it doesn't fit with everyone's expectations. The whole scene is loaded with symbolism that points to who Jesus is. Moses and Elijah represent and embody the Old Covenant. Again, Moses represents the law. Elijah represents the prophets. Here they are with Jesus now, confirming him in his mission and ministry—in a sense passing the torch. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. He's also the fulfilment of the prophets.

In Jesus everything the Old Covenant had promised and was working toward is being fulfilled.

And that makes the discussion of his “departure” even more profound. The Greek word Luke uses can take on a number of different meanings: not just “departure”, but it can also be a euphemism for death—as we might say someone is “passing away”. That certainly applies to what Jesus has said will happen at Jerusalem. But the Greek word is one we all recognise: *exodos*. It’s the word for *the Exodus* in the Old Testament—God’s release of his people from their bondage in Egypt. When Luke uses the word here it’s loaded with the significance of that event. Jesus isn’t just discussing his death with Moses and Elijah; he’s discussing the exodus in which he’s going to lead his people out of bondage, not from Egypt this time, but from sin and death. The exodus in which Moses led the people is just a type, just a shadow of the exodus in which Jesus will lead the way. And here the disciples get a hint at the big picture. It’s through rejection by the elders and priests and it’s through his death that Jesus will lead this new exodus and in it he will take his place as the Messiah and King. It’s through the exodus-death of the Messiah and as he rises to life again on the third day that he will vindicate his people and establish his kingdom.

And this is why, as Jesus is praying about the awful events to come and about his own rejection and death, he’s suddenly transfigured. It’s in those awful events, that Jesus will show his glory. In giving up himself he will redeem his people once and for all. So in this

Transfiguration is a foretaste for the disciples of the glorified Jesus they’ll meet on the other side of the Cross.

Look now at verses 32-33:

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. 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.

Peter’s always the impetuous one. As we’ll see again in Gethsemane the night before Jesus is crucified, when Jesus prays, his disciples usually fall asleep. They’re snapped out of it by the dazzling brightness. They saw Jesus’ glory. And when it looked like Moses and Elijah were leaving Peter burst out, “Master, this is just too good to let pass. Let’s build tents for the three of you so that this never has to end!” Why not? Aside from basking in the amazing glow of glory, who wouldn’t want to spend some time with Moses and Elijah? And in light of this talk about departure and exodus and rejection and being put to death, who wouldn’t want to stay on the mountaintop? Who wants to walk down into the dark valley when you can stay in the visible and obvious presence of God’s glory? But Luke says that Peter didn’t know what he was saying. Peter didn’t understand. We often do the same sort of thing. We have a mountaintop experience of God and we want to build a tent and stay there forever. But that’s not

how it’s to be. Staying on the mountaintop might be good for Peter, John, and James, but if they never leave and if they never pass with Jesus through the dark valley, through rejection and death, there will be no resurrection, no victory over sin and death, and no kingdom. Good for Peter? Sure, at least in the short term. But down in the valley is an even greater good for the entire human race. That’s what Jesus’ transfiguration is about. It points the way to glory. And so in response to Peter, everything suddenly changes.

As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” 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. (Luke 9:34-36)

Suddenly it gets dark as a cloud envelopes Peter, John, and James on the mountain. After all the talk about *exodus*, they couldn’t have helped but think of the cloud and thunder and lightening that had surrounded Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai when he’d gone up to meet the Lord. Now the cloud envelopes them—God’s presence surrounding them. And the Father speaks just as he did at Jesus’ baptism, but this time, instead of speaking to Jesus to confirm his identity and mission, the Father speaks to the disciples: “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”

Jesus knows who he is and now that identity is confirmed for his

disciples. He's God's Son. He's God's Chosen One. That describes Israel. Israel was God's son. Israel was God's chosen. And now God confirms for the disciples: Jesus has taken the role of Israel on himself. The covenant and all its obligations, promises, and blessings are now finding their fulfillment in him. And so it shouldn't be surprising that when the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone. It's just Jesus. The law and the prophets got us here, but Jesus is now fulfilling them. The Old Covenant is in the past; through Jesus and through this new exodus, God is establishing a New Covenant and constituting a new Israel, not based on ethnicity, law, diet, or circumcision, but on faith in this Son of Man who embodies Israel himself. Not just freeing the people from bondage in Egypt, but this time freeing us from bondage to sin and death.

This comes as Jesus is about to end his ministry in Galilee. It's time to start making the trip to Jerusalem. It's time to leave the mountaintop and walk down into the valley. But they leave the mountaintop in faith knowing that no matter how amazing and stunning the glory they saw there was, Jesus is eventually going to be revealed in even greater glory. They now have the faith to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

Think if the hymn lyrics again:

*When we walk with the Lord
In the light of his Word,
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and
obey.*

Peter, John, and James walked with the Lord. They walked with him because they had seen God working through him. He said some things that didn't fit their preconceived ideas. He said some things that sounded dangerous and crazy. But they walked with him still and the Father shed his glory on them as he revealed the glory of Jesus that they couldn't naturally see for themselves. It was that revelation, that Transfiguration, that confirmed Jesus' claims for them and strengthened their faith as they followed him from the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration to the glory of Mount Calvary.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us too to take up our own crosses and to follow him. We can't stay on the mountaintop forever. The Christian journey is guaranteed to lead us into dark valleys. For many of our brothers and sisters it has and still does even led to martyrdom. Even for people of big faith it can be a hard thing to follow Jesus where he leads us sometimes, but we can follow in faith if we know him and if we know who he is. We know Jesus better as we walk with him in faith, first through the small and easy things—on the mountaintops—but even more so with each valley he leads us through. But don't forget and just as important is that we get to know him better as we walk, as we steep ourselves in the "light of his Word"—as we study Scripture, learning his promises and seeing how he's been true to them in the past. We need both to deepen our faith. And, friends, it's as we walk in faith with Jesus through the hard times and the hard events—for some even through martyrdom—that the light of his glory shines into the darkness of the world and

gives others reason to believe for themselves the Good News we proclaim.

Let us pray: "Father in heaven, whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain, and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem: give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross that in the world to come we may see him as he is; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.