

“Up and Down the Mountain”

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Luke 9:28-36

Sometimes I just feel like I have said it all before. I have preached the Baptism of Christ, which is really hard to come up with an explanation for. I have preached the Resurrection, which is hard to say anything new about –“He is risen. He is risen indeed.” I have preached the ascension of Christ into heaven, which is every bit as spooky as the Transfiguration, but, I think, a whole lot easier to locate the meaning of. But here we are, and every year it does me good to look at it again.

The account of the Transfiguration is difficult to understand. I am not alone in this thought. Many commentators on the Gospel of Luke speak of the difficulty of this passage. It defies historical analysis. Simply put, it is a spiritual story about a supernatural event.

Many experiences of life defy explanation. Can you explain your emotion of love for a child? Can you give a rational explanation for your love for your spouse? Can you give a simple scientific and intellectual account of God’s call in your heart? We can use many different images, but we never quite capture the reality of our experience. These experiences are more than rational, more than facts. All these experiences defy human analysis. The Transfiguration provides us more than we can comprehend.

Jesus goes up a mountain, away and apart from all the crowds that have been following him for bread and healing and whatever. He is even leaving behind 9 out of the 12 disciples taking with him only these 3 who seem to be in on everything. There on the mountain, he talks with the two greatest figures from the history of the covenant people.

The images are familiar Biblical images. There is a mountain and a cloud. There is a voice from heaven. There is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. There are important realities here. It is a visionary moment for Jesus and the disciples. There is a revealing, an unveiling of the nature and purpose of his life. Moses

and Elijah, representative of the Law and the Prophets, appear in support of Jesus. They talked about what Luke calls Jesus' exodus, his departure, passion, death and resurrection. Jesus finds support from God and past leaders for his path ahead. A divine glory illuminates Jesus. God confirms the path toward the difficulties ahead in Jerusalem as the right way.

When the discussion seems to be drawing to a close, good old Peter steps in: Peter who is half the time right on the money about what is going on with Jesus and half the time without a clue. Peter now shows us his latter half: the one that is completely clueless about what he sees. He offers to erect a monument, a sign in honor of this moment in the life of Jesus. Peter still thinks that victory and winning and monuments in his honor are part of the benefits of being the chosen one of God. God, perhaps in order to head Peter off at the pass, sends down a cloud on the whole scene and says, "THIS IS MY SON, MY CHOSEN ONE; LISTEN TO HIM."

And then, they go back down the mountain. Luke says Peter, James, and John kept quiet about the whole event at that time. Matthew and Mark agree that the reason they didn't tell anybody was that Jesus told them not to – nobody was to know about this event until after he had died and risen again. That makes sense to me. If even Peter couldn't get it, couldn't see that it was death, and not victory, that Jesus was heading toward, how could anybody else be expected to see it. After Jesus had died and risen, then maybe it would make more sense.

Something happened this week that has changed the way I have always seen the Transfiguration. I have always seen this passage as Jesus changing to prepare himself to go to Jerusalem to face the final fight, death. The voices from on high, the change of clothing and even the historical figures all point to that movement where Jesus is changed and ready to move to the next stage of his earthly mission. But I also noticed that it was not just Jesus who had changed, but also the disciples. Yes, Peter will still say stupid things, but there is a new focus on what Jesus is saying to them and how Jesus reacts to them. They too are changed by this event.

This week, Europe has seen the face of war once again. A news commentator stated that on the morning of the invasion, Europe has experienced something that has changed who they fundamentally are. "The World Will Never Be the

Same!” We understand what that means after 9-11, we too were fundamentally changed and could never go back. The world has been changed because the ego of a mad man who wishes to dominate the world.

Listening to the news, there are people ready to take up arms. There are people who are looking to find a place to hide. There are folks who are trying to pretend that this did not happen and live their lives like it was the day before the invasion. But what about the church? What do you want to do?

We need to allow Jesus and this moment to change us. We need to follow Jesus. Jesus is not doing his saving work up there on the mountain. Jesus is just getting himself cranked up for his saving work. He does his saving work in Jerusalem and the valleys of life. And I think that if anyone wants to be the Body of Christ in this world, then we too are called to do his saving work right where Jesus did it himself – in the valley – in the midst of the passion and pain and death of the world. This is where God has placed us, and it is here that we are to be the church. Can we save the world or make the whole world feel safe again? No, but that is not our job. Our job is to love those Jesus loved, and to minister to the needs of those we can reach.

Our gatherings for worship, study, prayer and fellowship only makes sense in light of the ministry that we do outside of the walls of our churches and our studies. They only make sense in light of how they inform our work 7 days a week outside the sanctuary. Christ’s saving work was accomplished when he stepped into creation and shared our pain and shared our death. He shared the worst that life offers us and redeemed it all in his resurrection.

We are the Body of Christ most closely, most truly and most recognizably when we too step off of our mountain and into the heart of creation. It is there that we find people who are in the valleys of pain and suffering. When we share the pain of those around us, we can then, be believed when, in the midst of it all, we tell our brothers and sisters “today (not tomorrow or next week or at the end of time) that they are with the Lord in paradise.”

That is when we share in Christ’s redeeming work. That is when we live out our baptism into his death and resurrection. That is when we are the Body of Christ. Amen.