

THE JESUS WE NEVER KNEW

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Luke 9:28-36 (NRSV)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. [29] And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. [30] Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. [31] They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. [32] Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. [33] Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. [34] While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. [35] Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" [36] When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18 (NRSV)

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, [13] not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. [14] But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. [15] Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; [16] but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. [18] And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

THE RETREAT

They went up a mountain to pray, just Jesus and his best friends, Peter, James and John. It sounds a lot like a spiritual retreat.

We know about such things. Some of us retreat to the mountains of North Carolina or Georgia to escape the summer heat and draw closer to our maker. Some in this very congregation make the journey religiously.

How does the old hymn go? "Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer that takes me from a world of care." When we pray we shut our eyes so that we can shut out the world and better focus on God.

That's what I think of when I think of retreat, a few moments out of this world of care, a time to quietly reflect upon what is most important in my life. There's much to be said for a retreat like that.

But, if you've been on the journey with Jesus very long, you know that even times of retreat can become much more than you bargained for. So it was for these disciples long ago.

They were alone on that mountaintop. Jesus was praying, and the disciples did what they always did during the critical moments of Jesus' ministry. They fall asleep. In their mind the world of care was far away.

This wouldn't be the last time this would happen. Soon they would fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane ... unable to pray and watch with Jesus as his final hour approached. Sleepy disciples are forever closing their eyes to

Jesus and to the world around them. We'll worry about the problems of the world tomorrow. Today we're on retreat.

But, even on the mountaintop, if you're with Jesus, getting away from it all is not an option.

A man told of taking a retreat on the Appalachian Trail. He had dreamed about doing it for years. He thought that he needed time away from job and family and had planned to stay on the trail for a month. He barely made it two weeks, and he came home saying that it was one of the most disturbing experiences of his life.

He said, "I got out there alone, in the woods, no distractions, nobody out there but me and God. I had all the time in the world to think about all the things I usually avoid thinking about. I just about went crazy!"

AWAKENED BY GLORY

Don't go to the mountain alone unless you're willing to have your sleep interrupted by the Spirit of God. You will have to face questions that you have been avoiding. It can be quite an "eye opening" experience!

And so it was for those first disciples. Their sleep is interrupted by God's glory. As Jesus prayed, the Scripture tells us His face changed and his clothing became as bright as a flash of lightning.

You know what it's like to be awakened in the middle of the night by a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning.

That's what it was like for those disciples. No longer are they worried about catching a few "Zs". Now they are awake to the fact that something new is happening.

But, what could it be?

MOSES AND ELIJAH

They look up and see not only see Jesus but they see also see two men talking with him, Moses and Elijah. Now it had been many, many years since God buried Moses and Elijah was taken up into heaven by the whirlwind of God's power.

They represented the epitome, the high point of Israel's faith history, and now they were both there in the flesh. Their presence was a testament to the ministry of Jesus.

According to the Scriptures, Moses and Elijah were talking with the glorified Jesus about his "departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." The word translated "departure" means literally "exodus."

As Moses earlier led God's people on an exodus from slavery in Egypt, now Jesus will lead a new "exodus" from Jerusalem. His death and resurrection would mark the beginning a new kingdom that would surpass even the greatest prophet and lawgiver.

As Moses and Elijah were about to depart, an awestruck Peter finally finds his voice and makes a suggestion. "Master, it's good to be here. Let's make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (Luke adds an interpretive comment at this point. He said that Peter spoke without thinking. I must admit that I find myself doing that on occasion as well.)

WHO IS JESUS?

But, Peter's spontaneous speech about making three memorials to mark the magic moment is interrupted, interrupted by none other than the voice of God. They are overshadowed by a cloud which in the Bible represents the mysterious presence of God, and a voice proclaims from the cloud,

“This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him!”

I wonder if God ever interrupts us as he did Peter long ago. We have our plans to build memorials and stay on the mountain forever. But, that is not God's plan for those who would be disciples. The mountaintop vision is only a stopover on a larger journey. It was true then, and it is true now.

Transfiguration Sunday marks the last Sunday before Lent, that 40 day journey toward Jerusalem and the cross of Calvary. Before long the dazzling white robes will be soaked in blood. There will be no voice from heaven, no dazzling light, no luminous cloud.

There will only be the voice of derision saying, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down off the cross.” It won't be long before we are forced to consider that disturbing scene again.

But, this Sunday, we are on the mountaintop. And on the mountaintop we once again ask the question that the disciples no doubt asked themselves long ago on the mountaintop. Who is this Jesus?

And the answer we receive is the same answer they received.

Jesus is God's Son, the chosen one. And we need to listen to him.

LISTEN TO HIM!

Now we're able to accept part one of that statement with no trouble. Who is Jesus? Jesus is God's Son. We have known that for a long time. But, part two of the heavenly pronouncement is a little harder to follow. The command is this: “Listen to Him.”

The Bible tells us that it is one thing to call Jesus Lord. It is quite another to actually follow Him. Jesus once told his disciples, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." Matthew 7:21 (NRSV)

Peter, James and John were close to Jesus. Some even think of them as the inner circle of the twelve. And yet they were often blind to the true identity of Jesus. Why were they unable to understand the true nature of Jesus? Why were they unable to really listen to him?

They had preconceived notions about Jesus. Their ideas about salvation and what it meant to be a Messiah were at odds with what Jesus actually said. They could not conceive of a suffering Messiah. Their only vision was of glory, a Messiah who would lead them to victory.

So did they change their ideas?

Of course they didn't. They just fell asleep when the sermons got too hot to handle! (I think I've seen that happen myself!)

As the Bible might put it, they had eyes but could not see and ears but could not hear.

THE JESUS WE NEVER KNEW

Unlike those first disciples, we have a complete account of who Jesus was and what Jesus came to do. And yet, we too have a hard time listening to Jesus. We too often misunderstand Jesus. We are often blind to the obvious.

Philip Yancey wrote a book that I know many of you have read. It was entitled, "The Jesus I Never Knew." In that book he contends that we all have certain images or views of Christ.

We think we are worshipping the Jesus of the Bible, but quite often our images of Jesus are significantly distorted by childhood memories, cultural influences and personal preferences. He makes a strong case that we too are blinded by *our assumptions* about who Jesus is and what Jesus comes to do.

It's this desire to transform Jesus into the man that we want him to be that is behind Peter's speech. Peter wanted to honor Jesus by making him equal to Moses and Elijah. Peter wanted to put Jesus in the religious version of the hall of fame.

We want to do the same thing. We talk about the glory of Jesus and his connection with the great religious leaders of the past. We want to make him into an excellent philosopher or a wonderful moral example or even our best friend.

The main thing is to make sure that we set up a shrine and put Jesus in it. The main thing is to make sure that Jesus does not escape from the religious world into the real world.

We have to separate religion and politics. We have to keep him on the mountaintop in the rarified air of spiritual visions because if he makes down into the valley into the real world, he will cause us all kinds of problems. As God made men and women in His own image, let us remake Jesus in our image. It's safer that way.

It has been rightly noted that everyone who tries to write an unbiased "history" on the life of Jesus often comes up with a portrait that looks suspiciously like the author of the book.

The search for the historical Jesus has been a failure because it is trying to have Jesus on our own terms. We want to control him and analyze and memorialize him. We want to write volumes and volumes of scholarly books on his life.

THE COURAGE TO FOLLOW

But, the one thing we do not want to do is listen to him. We do not want to follow him down the mountain into the messy, uncertain and dangerous world. We do not want to take up a cross. We do not want to give up even one small part of our life.

You see, we really don't have a problem with the "Who is Jesus?" question. We know who he is. We know that he is God's Son, the chosen one. We've know it for a long time. We've heard the voice. We've seen the glory.

The question is this.

Do we have the guts to follow him down the mountain into the valley and on to Jerusalem?

Do we have the courage to really listen to him instead of the sound of our own voice?

We want Jesus to be the one who rescues us from evil. But, Jesus turns out to be the one who leads us into confrontation with evil. He leads us into battle armed only with love and forgiveness.

No wonder we don't want to listen to Him! No wonder we persist in memorializing an image of Jesus in stone.

But, be warned. That image is far from the Spirit of the living Lord that challenges us to hear his word and follow Him even today.

It's still dangerous and difficult to be a follower of Christ. And yet, once again we have come to that part of the church year where we are reminded of the hard truth. It is the way of the cross that leads home. We must take up our cross and follow Jesus on the road that leads to Jerusalem.

REFLECTED GLORY

On the mountain Jesus was transfigured. And, in a way the disciples were transfigured as well. The Bible tells us that they didn't say anything about this experience for a long time (9:36). After it first happened, quite frankly they didn't know what to say.

But, the time came when they cherished this moment as a turning point. The glory of this moment reminded them of an even greater moment when the crucified Christ was raised from the dead, a sign of redemption for the whole world. From the mountaintop they could see the glory of Easter.

And the glory they saw in Jesus was a glory they were called to reflect to others. It was not a private moment to memorialize on the mountaintop of their dreams. It was a call to evangelize the world. The veil had been lifted and the glory of God's presence now walked the earth.

That glory still walks the earth. It is the Spirit of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is (as our anthem put it this morning) a Spirit of joy and a Spirit of freedom. It is a Spirit that brings us what we cannot bring ourselves; it is a Spirit of redemption. It is a glory that is above us and beyond us, and yet it is as close as the word of truth and hope revealed so plainly in Jesus.

DRAWING CLOSER TO GLORY

A couple was attending a meeting in Rome. They toured the Vatican and waited in line for hours to get a glimpse of Michelangelo's work in the Sistine chapel.

They said that the paintings from a distance didn't look all that impressive. People even joked about getting a "paint by number" replica of Michelangelo's work for their own ceilings.

But, when they drew closer, they were overwhelmed. The paintings seemed to engulf them. Everyone became quiet. Necks ached with the effort to keep looking up. Now they were seeing the paintings as Michelangelo intended for them to be seen. The impact was unforgettable.

I would suggest that this is a parable of how we can best view the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Some of us try to view the glory from afar. We have heard of Jesus. We may even profess to be a disciple. But, we keep our distance. From a distance not much is required of us and not much is received.

But, as time goes by, events sometimes draw us closer. We begin to look up instead of about, and our image of Jesus begins to change.

His presence looms over us, and we listen, really listen to him. We begin to understand, perhaps for the first time the real glory of the picture he has painted. For the first time we recognize our weakness and our need for a Savior.

And when we look up, our view of Jesus is transfigured. We no longer see him from afar. Now we see him close up and personal. And as he was changed, we are changed. We are transfigured by what we see and what we hear.

DRAWING NEAR IN LENT

The mountain of transfiguration was not the last mountain that Jesus climbed. The last mount he climbed was at a place called Calvary. It was a strenuous journey in which Jesus was killed by people he loved. The glory of the transfiguration seemed overcome by the dark cloud of sin and death.

But, even this early in the season, even before the long journey of Lent begins, we begin to get hints of glory. From a high mountaintop we view the glory of our final destination. We see a place where the world was given hope for life eternal, a place where sin and evil were crucified, and a place where the world was transfigured by the God who made it.

Lent is traditionally a time of reflection and prayer. Lent is a time when we dare to draw closer to the glory of a God, a time when we learn to listen.

Before I became a minister, I worked as a psychotherapist, and it was my job to listen, to really listen to someone else. That might sound like an easy job, but let me assure you that it wasn't. I tried to listen not only to what a client said but also to what that client meant. I observed body language and tried to "feel" the emotions of the person who had come for help. I came home totally exhausted every night.

My job required great concentration on my part, and it required a lot of work on the part of the person who was coming for help. If they were not motivated to change, to listen to the rhythms of their life in a critical way, very little progress would be made.

But, on the other hand, if we both strained to listen, if we sought to really hear what was being said beyond the words spoken, healing could often take place.

In a greater way, I would urge you to use these forty days of Lent as a time to listen to Jesus. Strain to hear his words not as pronouncements from afar but as a presence that overshadows you even today.

What promises does he make? What challenges does he give you? It is a long journey we take these next few weeks. There will be struggles. But, the glory of transformation is also possible as well. We can be healed.

May God give us the courage to open our hearts and minds. My God help us see the Jesus we never knew and be changed.

Amen.

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