

Luke 9:28-36 The Transfiguration Feb 14, 2010

In this story of The Transfiguration, there are many points where we can dig and find important lessons God is teaching us. It starts off saying that this occurs 8 days after “ these sayings.” Those would be Peter declaring Jesus to be the Messiah (Christ) and Jesus telling his disciples about his death and resurrection, along with the idea that we who follow him must take up our cross and be willing to lose our life for his sake.

So, a little over a week later, Jesus takes his inner circle, Peter along with the brothers James and John, up a mountain in order to have some time to pray. It is while he is praying that Jesus is transfigured: his face is changed and his clothes become “dazzling white.” And, if this is not enough, suddenly Moses and Elijah, very important people from Jewish history, are standing with Jesus, talking about his death and resurrection.

The 3 disciples have been fighting off sleep, much like they’ll do right before Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. But, this time they manage to stay awake, and they see all this. Peter, the leader, “not knowing what he said,” suggests that the disciples should erect 3 “dwellings” or tents.

But, while Peter is talking, the whole place is covered by a cloud. Then they hear a voice coming from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Chosen, listen to him!” Suddenly, it is all over, the cloud lifts, Jesus is alone, and they walk back down the mountain. They don’t say anything about this right at that time. It may have been after the Resurrection that they start talking about this incredible experience.

And who could blame them? It sounds like they were hallucinating: two long-dead men, a voice from a cloud, and Jesus transformed for just a moment. Crazy.

Now, I said there are lessons to be learned. Let's look at some:

1. Jesus takes his 3 closest friends from the group of disciples to go up on the mountain specifically to pray. See how important quiet time with the Lord is for Jesus himself. See the example he sets for us, the deep spiritual need for quiet time, away from our daily work and play, to be with God, to listen as well as to speak. If that was important to Jesus, who WAS God, imagine how important it is for us. It is so important, he took 3 of his disciples with him, to let them experience it for themselves.
2. WHILE JESUS IS PRAYING, he is transfigured. His face is "changed," and his clothes become "dazzling white." This is more than just a show for the benefit of 3 disciples. It is the revelation of his divinity. Now Peter, James and John can know for certain that Jesus is the Son of God, not just a good and wise teacher.
3. Moses represents the Law found in the Hebrew Scriptures, our OT. Elijah represents the Prophets of the OT. Together, they represent the entire Hebrew Scriptures. And they stand there, consulting with Jesus, treating him with respect. Both Moses and Elijah had been dead for centuries, and their presence represents the truth of everything Jesus has said about who he is. It represents his deep connection with the heroes of the Bible. It shows how Jesus is a part of the long line of men who have been faithful to God's call on their lives.
4. Luke inserts his own editorial comment about Peter. When Peter offers to make shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, Luke tells us

very directly: “not knowing what he said.” In other words, Peter is an idiot. He is saying a stupid thing. Perhaps it is stupid because this moment is obviously not going to last. There will be no need for tents. Maybe this is one of the issues when people complain about Organized Religion. The Church has the need to control Christ, to keep things as they always have been, to corral Christ and give him a little house where we’ll always know where to find him. Peter’s intentions were good, but misplaced. This is also true of the Church. But rather than build a shelter, to try and make something permanent that isn’t, we should be listening and watching for the movement of the Holy Spirit, and follow where it leads. Being a good Christian, being a good Church is not about control. It is about following where God would lead us, recognizing that as the world changes, and as the church changes, God calls us to new ministries. Our job is to keep up, not nail things down.

5. Finally, as Peter is saying his stupid thing, a cloud appears and envelopes everything. I can identify with this. Not only do I occasionally say stupid things, I have also been completely enveloped by a cloud. In 1971, when I was 15, I went to Japan to participate in the Boy Scout World Jamboree. One of the highlights for me was climbing Mount Fuji, along with 999 other scouts from around the world. It’s not a hard climb, but as we reached the summit, a typhoon moved in. It was raining and snowing and sleeting and hailing all at once. And, the whole mountain was covered by a dense, white cloud. Going down Mount Fuji, visibility was severely limited by the cloud. In some areas, we were walking on dark grey stones, seeing nothing ahead

of us but white. The experience was surreal. And, while I don't recall saying anything stupid right then, I think I know what the disciples were experiencing as far as being overshadowed by a cloud.

6. But, then, to top it all off, they hear a voice coming from the cloud. They were already "terrified" by the cloud itself. Now here comes the voice of God. And what the voice says is what it said at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Chosen/Beloved. Listen to him!" If the three disciples didn't completely understand the symbolism of Moses and Elijah chatting with Jesus, they must have understood the voice of God. Not only is Jesus part of the line of great people we find in the OT, he is also the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God. They can't see anything in the cloud, but they should have found their understanding of who they'd been following clarified.
7. Then it was all over. The cloud was gone. Moses and Elijah were gone, and Jesus was normal again. We can have mountaintop experiences, but we cannot live on the mountaintop. We must come down and get to work. The mountaintop experience is something we might need to carry on the work. It could motivate us or excite us or empower us, but our life is about using that motivation, excitement and power to do God's work in the world. We are not called, as Christians, to be taken out of the world, but we are called to be, not of the world, but certainly in the world. We can, and should, take time to be in God's presence without distractions. But on a normal day, the distractions may be what lead us to ministry.

8. Finally, the disciples don't talk about this at all. Clearly, someone eventually talked about it, or it wouldn't be in the Bible. But, the disciples needed time to figure out what happened, to process the experience, to pray for enlightenment. They knew that they could not possibly share this experience in a way that anyone else could understand. Their silence on the issue was a way to avoid saying stupid things.

So, can we take something away from The Transfiguration that will help us in our Christian journey? Perhaps it is the importance of prayer. Not only did Jesus go away to pray, The Transfiguration occurs while he is praying.

Perhaps it's the idea that God doesn't work for us. We don't call the shots. We cannot put God in a little shed to be removed when needed. When Peter tried this, with good intentions, he was ignored by everyone around him. God is wild. God is free. Our job is to pay attention and try to keep up.

Perhaps it's the idea that the mountaintop is not where we can live. We cannot expect that kind of experience every day. We CAN expect God to be speaking to us all the time, everywhere. But the ecstasy or the terror found on the mountaintop is not for us to hold onto or try to recreate on our own. It's a gift from God. May we appreciate it, if it happens to us, but not grieve because it hasn't. Nine of the disciples, who did wonderful work for Jesus and the Church, didn't have this experience. May we all spend the rest of our lives listening....

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