

February 14, 2010

The Transfiguration

LUKE 9:28-36

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One of the reasons that I love following Jesus is because He is always doing something new – something we would never have guessed, like in today’s reading. It is one of the most amazing events in scripture: the Transfiguration of Christ. It is overwhelming. Having such an amazing scene demands that we try to picture it in our minds eye because so much is going on that is *visual*: Jesus’ face changes appearance. His clothes become like a flash of lightning. We see Moses and Elijah appear – even though they died ages ago. We see a cloud appear, and then that cloud envelops the disciples. And after seeing all those things, a voice comes from the cloud and immediately it all vanishes. Just like that. All of it was gone. “Then they saw Jesus alone.”

On the one hand it is so captivating that we want to picture the scene, and on the other hand, we can’t do it. We can’t take it all in. It was such a unique event, there really is nothing in our lives that we can compare it to. The Transfiguration happened once; that’s it. To see God’s glory like this is something that we would all love to see, but how ready would we be for it? What words do you put to an experience like that? When Peter and the others finally had the presence of mind to think coherently after this experience, I bet they were thinking, “*What just happened?* ...What was that all about?” It was so big and meaningful, they couldn’t prepare for all that. They certainly weren’t expecting it; they were asleep!

They actually saw the glory of God. How do you talk about that? Even after years of reflection, Peter wrote about this experience in the Bible in one of his letters, yet he still could not explain it. He simply wrote, “we were eyewitnesses” (I Peter 1:16-18). He just says: Yes, we were there on the mountain. Yes, it happened. Yes, we were ... *present* (which isn’t exactly a thorough explanation.) And if Peter – the one who was there – the one who lived every day with the earthly Jesus – if he could hardly comment on the experience, it certainly is not simple for us. “What just happened?” How would you answer that about the Transfiguration? Why did the Transfiguration happen? What was the point?

It was such a profound experience; it is so rich a passage; that it calls us to be still. This is not something we can logic out. Sitting with something so awesome that it just overwhelms us in its holiness and power makes us fidgety, doesn’t it? That is not a place we want to be because our first reaction is to *do something*. Even Peter didn’t want to be still. In the midst of this great experience, as Moses and Elijah are starting to depart, Peter can no longer sit still in the intensity of the holy moment, so he *blurts* out to Jesus, “It is good for us to be here, let us set up three shelters...” and just to be clear, the Bible even says, “he did not know what he was saying.”

He was overwhelmed. Feeling the heavy presence of God often causes us humans to respond in this way. We become acutely aware of our brokenness and God’s holiness, and often our first reaction is to try to gain some control. The last thing we want to do is sit still. Peter wanted to set up shelters – finite containers – to keep things manageable. He wanted to get busy and do something – and what he wanted to do was put the Glory of God in the proverbial box. ...It’s easier than being still.

We do it too. When we look to God only for safety and to make us comfortable rather than ask Him to challenge us and open us up to His plan, we put Him in a box. When we look for the right church program to fulfill our needs and expect everything to be for us, instead of seeking ways to serve because the Church belongs to God, then we put God in a box. In fact, we

Presbyterians have our own ways of putting God in a box. One way is that our default mode is often intellectual – to study, to think. For example, with this text we might be tempted to research the parallels between Moses and Jesus and the theme of a New Exodus. But what if instead of getting caught up in the facts and the questions, we sat with the person of Jesus. We just sat there. That’s how this whole Transfiguration came about anyway: Jesus went up the mountain to pray. To be quiet before God. Practice spiritual disciplines.

In this being quiet before God, when we enter His presence, we are filled with awe – and that awe that leads us to be open to God’s move. In fact, the whole chapter of Luke 9 prepares us to take God out of the box by keep asking us, “Who do we think Jesus is?” First, after hearing reports about Jesus, Herod was asking, “Who is this?” Then Jesus asked it twice. “Who do *the people* say that I am?” he asked the disciples. And then he said, “Who do *you* say that I am?” To this, Peter makes the great confession, “You are the Christ of God,” and immediately we are in the Transfiguration. It is as if to say: *this* helps answer the question of who Jesus is. At the Transfiguration, that is when we are seeing who Jesus is. Yes, Jesus is the Christ, and now let’s see how glorious this Christ is! And when we see Him for who He really is, we are filled with awe. And if you want to know who this Jesus is then we respond with our whole selves because God is awesome. The Transfiguration is not something that can be figured out with our minds alone; it calls us to open our hearts. It calls us not to be focused on ourselves, but on Someone bigger around us. It is a part of the process of surrendering to God.

Even though Peter just made the great confession, he was still surrendering his heart to God. At the Transfiguration, Peter was opened up to Jesus in a fresh way to God because he was awestruck and humbled. The box that Peter had put Jesus in just fell apart. Instead of saying, “What just happened?” Maybe after awhile he finally came to realize that he should be asking a different question. Maybe he started saying, “*Who? Who* just happened?”

Peter was the person who lived with Jesus everyday. Peter was the person who shared work with Jesus. Peter was the one who just made the good confession. Peter was the one who just realized that he still had a lot to learn. He had just missed what Elijah and Moses and Jesus were talking about because he was asleep.

And honestly, we sleep before God all the time too, don’t we? If there is one thing we really *can* relate to in this passage in this awesome passage, it’s that. When was the last time we had 10 solid minutes of quiet before God? Prayer is an easy thing for us to skip, isn’t it? Skipping prayer is being asleep before God. Not nurturing that interior life is being asleep to what God is doing right before us.

The Transfiguration wasn’t for Jesus; it was for our benefit. Jesus didn’t change. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ inner character did not change; it was outwardly revealed. He was not changed at the Transfiguration; the disciples were. As they were there, witnessing this great event, all of a sudden they were speechless. ...How could they be following this Jesus every day and be missing so much? How could they miss Jesus in their daily lives? How could they not have taken time to listen? ...How could we?

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The event of the Transfiguration only happened once. What miraculously appeared and was seen quickly vanished. After seeing the Kingdom of God, after seeing Moses and Elijah appear in splendor, after seeing the Holy Spirit manifest in the form of a cloud, after having all these visual experiences – they heard a voice. A voice came from the cloud, and it said, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him.” Even at the Transfiguration with all these amazing

images, we are called not to *see* but to *listen*. To be still. We can't control how God will appear or work in our lives, but we can be open to receive. We can take time to listen.

The Transfiguration – like the Bible – is not about “what happened.” It is not so much about answering the question “What?” than it is about asking the question, “Who?” And if you want to know the question to the question “Who?” know that it is answered by being still. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. It begins the Season of Lent. This is the perfect time – the perfect opportunity – to *listen*. To take God out of the box. Take God out of the box by being still. In silence. This Lent, listen, receive, and you will witness God's glory. Amen.

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