

"While He was Praying..."

Luke 9:28-36

Rev. Don J. Best

Transfiguration of the Lord

Bethel Presbyterian Church

March 3, 2019

Our gospel reading today is Luke, chapter 9, verses 28 through 36. This is Luke's story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. When Jesus took Peter, John, and James up a mountain. When Jesus' appearance was changed, and his clothes became brilliantly white; when Moses and Elijah appeared beside Jesus; when a voice from heaven spoke in a cloud. This story also appears in Matthew and Mark, but Luke makes a few subtle changes. You have probably heard this story almost every year, just before the beginning of Lent, because that is Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, in the liturgical year. This is an amazing tale of glory and fear and clouds and a voice from heaven.

Is there anything new we can hear from this story? Is there anything new we can learn from this story? Listen with fresh ears to Luke's story of the Transfiguration of Jesus:

Gospel Reading

²⁸ 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Luke makes changes to this story from the beginning: "about eight days." Matthew and Mark both say that this happens six days after Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah. Why Luke waits an additional two days is not clear, unless to make it a full week later. Second, for some reason Luke changes the order of the names for the three disciples: Peter, James and John is the usual listing of the three closest to Jesus, but Luke says that Jesus took, Peter, John and James up the mountain. But both of these changes seem insignificant; they really don't change the events or meaning of the story.

But, the very next thing Luke tells us is, at least I think, important. Luke tells us that Jesus and the three disciples, "went up the mountain to pray." Neither Matthew or Mark give a reason for the trip up the mountain. Did Jesus know what was about to happen, and took the three along as witnesses? If he did, why did he instruct them not to tell anyone? Or did Jesus think they needed to see this to help them understand what he had been telling them about the Son of Man suffering and dying at the hands of the leaders? Mathew and Mark just don't give us a reason for the trip up the mountain, but Luke tells us that they went up the mountain to pray. At least Jesus went up the mountain to pray.

I suppose there is nothing unusual about that. It's not the only time that Jesus went to a particular place to pray, and a mountain seems like a good place. People go up to high places in search of God, or knowledge, or wisdom. In Genesis chapter 11, the people tried to build a tower to reach the heavens. It makes sense to go up a mountain to pray, to be closer to God.

"And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face is changed. Matthew and Mark both say that Jesus was transfigured, but Luke tells us that it was his face that was changed. This is a direct reference to the Old Testament reading for this morning, when Moses' face shines after he meets with God on the mountain. When Moses came down from the mountain with tablets of the Law the skin of his face shined, and the Israelites were afraid to go near him. Being in the presence of God, on the mountain, or in prayer has a way of changing a person, and in the case of Moses and of Jesus their face was changed.

We don't know what Jesus prayed, only that the appearance of his face was changed. Maybe we can learn from this that what we pray is less important than the fact that we pray. Prayer can change us, maybe not our appearance, but certainly our nearness to God. I don't think we should presume that we are capable of being as near to God as Jesus, the Son of God, but prayer is our

way of getting closer to God. And when we are close to God, things can change. We can change when we come to God in prayer. I truly believe this, especially when our prayer includes listening for the voice of God.

While prayer may be the primary way we draw close to God, it certainly is not the only way. Two other ways we come to God are the sacraments. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. The sacrament does create the grace but it enables us to connect with the grace of God through words of liturgy and otherwise normal items from God's creation: water, bread, and wine; or in our case grape juice. There is nothing magical about either the words or the elements, but in combination they draw us into a closeness and connectedness with the One True God. The God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. The God of our ancestors, and the God of our future. The God that sent Jesus to earth. The same Jesus who gave us the sacraments.

It is no coincidence that the liturgy for both sacraments includes prayer, as we draw toward God, we respond in prayer: prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of inviting God to draw nearer to us.

In just a few minutes, Carter Johansen will be baptized. Carter, his parents, his family, and all of us, will be in the presence of God as Carter is claimed by the same God that transformed Jesus on the mountain. Carter will not change, he'll get a little wet, but he won't physically change. What will change for Carter, and for all of us, is that he will become part of the body of the Church. He will become part of the body of Christ. And through the promises that are made on his behalf, by his parents, and by this congregation, he will be nurtured and formed in the faith of Jesus Christ and the family of God.

The water used in his baptism will be ordinary water, but through the power of prayer and the grace of God, it will be the symbol of everything that God has done for his people throughout history. From the creation when water and dry land were separated. When the water of the sea was split to allow God's people to flee the Egyptians. When the woman went to the well and encountered Jesus, the living water, and learned of a life without thirst. And when God's own Son was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, not for his own sin, but for all of ours. God has used water as an instrument of God's grace for his children. And with this water God will mark Carter Allen as one of his own.

Later in the service, we will gather around the table of God; the table that Jesus himself prepares for us and for the church. And like Jesus when he gathered with disciples, we will share the bread and the cup. The body and blood of the Son of God. Not literally of course, but spiritually. Ordinary bread, and plain grape juice will be the instruments of God's grace in Jesus. The

grace that nourishes and feeds us. Feeds us in a very real way as we draw close to God, through adoption earned for us by Jesus Christ. We won't be physically changed, but that small bite of bread, and tiny sip of juice will feed us in a way that no earthly feast can. We will be fed by Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and sustained by the love of God.

Our face may not shine like the face of Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai; our clothes may not become dazzling white, but we will be changed. Through prayer, and the sacraments, when we draw near to God, we will be changed.

Let us pray:

God of grace, when we come to you in prayer, we come knowing that you will hear us. We come thinking that we are communicating with you, but we do not always come expecting to hear your voice, and to be changed by your presence. Help us, Lord, to listen, to hear your voice, be it from a cloud, or in our hearts, open our ears and minds to your word for us each and every day. Amen.