

The Transfiguration
Luke 9:28-43
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Well, it was a strange Winter Olympics that wrapped up a week ago. This year's event had the smallest TV audience in its history for a host of very legitimate reasons. But in the midst of all of it, I was all in again this year.

I love watching the Olympics, summer and winter. I love the incredible stories behind the athletes. I love watching the greatest athletes in the world compete at their sport. I love discovering and being completely puzzled by new sports I didn't know existed like doubles luge. It's just like regular luge, with a human dangerously careening down an ice track on a precariously small sled except there's a second human directly on top of the first human. Why? Was it not dangerous enough? Maybe we'll see triples luge in Paris. Who knows?

What always amazes me about the Olympics is the juxtaposition between the utter brevity of the moment of competition and the long arduous journey it took to train for that moment. A 5 second aerial jump, a 2.5 minute short program or downhill run may capture glory, but it was years of a disciplined life, physically and mentally, that made the glory possible; glory, it should be added, most will not experience.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. The placement of this story in the gospels as well as the placement of this day in the liturgical year marks a major transition. In the gospels, Jesus' ministry in Galilee winds down and the focus shifts to Jerusalem and what will unfold there. In the liturgical year, we shift out of the season following Epiphany and prepare for our Lenten journey to the cross. This story functions very much like the peak of a mountain, a summit from which we can see other towering peaks in the story of God's people. This is a major moment.

Luke's account bears many similarities to Matthew and Mark. We have the same cast of characters - Jesus along with Peter, James and John and then suddenly Moses and Elijah too! Peter wants to preserve the moment by setting up shop for a while and you really can't blame him. I'd want to make the moment last as long as possible too. A voice from the cloud speaks and then rather suddenly, only Jesus remains with the disciples and the scene comes to a close.

You know, taken by itself I've had a hard time connecting with this story this week. I get it, there are important theological truths being communicated here - the glory of God revealed in the person of Christ, affirming the mysterious union of both his humanity and divinity. Jesus is shown to be the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. These are incredibly important. But I think maybe it's the extraordinary nature of the experience

described with all of the pyrotechnics - the cloud, the voice from beyond, everything bathed in dazzling light. As a kid, I can remember at various times asking God for a sign, probably because I heard a story like this in Sunday school. God, just one shooting star so I know you're there... God, just the ability to fly for a little bit. Neither of these happened by the way.

I longed for the mountaintop. But it wasn't just then. I struggle to connect with this story now because for almost two years so many of the experiences that I would put in the "mountain top" category have eluded us. Mission trips where a room is filled with prayer, laughter and song. A packed sanctuary filled with singing without limitations. Big, gigantic meals together in community. Don't get me wrong. I'm so grateful for the way we've navigated the pandemic safely and wisely, taking all the necessary precautions along the way. But oh, how I long for the mountaintop.

If you can relate to this, it is helpful to look at this story within the broader context. This passage begins, "Now about eight days after these sayings." This refers to an immediately preceding section in which Jesus begins to talk openly about the fact that he will undergo great suffering, will be rejected, killed, and raised on the third day. Even on the mount of transfiguration, in the midst of the revealed glory Luke includes the detail of what exactly Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah. They were speaking of his departure but the word for departure is 'exodus.' They were speaking of Jesus' exodus, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

For as much as we make of whatever happened up on that mountain, Jesus does not really seem to dwell on it much at all. His mind is elsewhere. And then it is right back to reality in the very next scene with this tormented boy and his desperate father. Notice the striking parallel between verses 35 and 38. "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child." The first spoken by the voice in the cloud on the mountain; the second spoken by a terrified father pleading for the life of his son down in the valley.

It is as if the text is inviting us to recognize that the mountaintop may be where God's glory is seen the most clearly. But disciples are made in the valley, where the glory of God is no less present and real though it can be harder to perceive. Yes, God spoke on the mountaintop. But God also speaks in the very real and complex situations of our life. The mountaintop was never intended to be a destination. There was no pause for a teaching moment up there. Jesus offers no explanation of what was happening and as quick as it all happened, it was over.

It strikes me, and perhaps even gives me comfort that the experience on the mountain doesn't seem to have had much of an impact on Peter, James and John.

You'd think maybe they'd be hopped up on enough glory to heal the boy they encounter when they come down the mountain. But they are unable. You'd think they'd actually listen to the voice in the cloud and in turn listen to Jesus, but they are perpetually confounded by Jesus' resolve in the days to come to willingly enter into suffering.

You'd think maybe they would have had enough confidence and faith instilled in them by witnessing Jesus in his glory to stand by him to the bitter end. You and I know the stories. Denial. Desertion.

Maybe this shouldn't surprise us. How often have I had a mountain top experience only to then fail to allow that experience to infiltrate and disrupt the stagnant rhythms, practices, and habits of my life in order to reshape them into practices oriented toward the kingdom of God? How often have I wanted to experience the glory of discipleship without the training that being a disciple requires? The truth is that I so fervently chase the mountaintop that I miss the far more frequent opportunities to be open to God's in-breaking presence in the valley of every day life. It's like a sign hanging in a new monastic community, which reads, "Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes."

Friends, this Wednesday we begin our Lenten journey in the valley. We begin right where we are, with exactly who we are in the holy ordinariness of our lives. That is the only place we can begin. The sign of the cross and the words, "From dust you came and to dust you shall return" will be spoken. What freedom that God knows this truth about us, that we are dust - frail, broken, incomplete sinners, and yet God invites us in; stumbling, doubting, hoping our way into the kingdom of God.

I have no doubt the mountain top moments will come. But we cannot schedule or summon them. They are and always have been a gift and we, like Peter, James and John should be thankful when we experience them.

But the arena Jesus is most mindful of, where he knows disciples will be truly and deeply formed, is in the valley where they live moment to moment, day to day, whatever the circumstances may be - whether they are the monotony of a school day or the realities of war. I love this quote from Episcopal minister Debie Thomas, reflecting on this passage. "The kingdom of God shines most brightly against the backdrop of the parent who grieves, the child who cries, the "demons" who oppress, and the disciples who try but fail to manufacture the holy. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. God's beauty is best contained in broken vessels. We might not like this aspect of faith, but it's an aspect that has much to teach us."

Maybe, what this aspect of faith teaches us is that the Transfiguration was never intended to be just a memory of something incredible that happened once. But, maybe we are invited into a different posture in our lives, where we practice the expectant hope that God is truly present at all times and in all things; a posture where when we hear the cries of our neighbors we hear the very voice of God proclaiming "this is my beloved" and in so doing our very normal, ordinary lives will be transfigured again and again.

Amen.

Resources

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