

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 2, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Exodus 34:29-35; 2nd Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Scripture for Message: Luke 9:28-42 “in the Valley”

Our scripture today brings us full circle in Jesus’ ministry – it is the climax in our narratives of Jesus’ identity. Our time between Epiphany and Lent began with and ends with these words from heaven, “this is my Son.” At Jesus baptism the voice spoke to Jesus alone, “You are my Son, with whom I am pleased” but now the voice speaks to the disciples “This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!” We learned how that voice, at Jesus baptism, was strengthening and equipping Jesus for the trials ahead, now the voice which the disciples heard had the same purpose of strengthening and equipping them for the trials they will face. This event fully reveals Jesus’ identity and that may have driven home the point of what he was just a few days ago telling them about the suffering and crucifixion that must occur for his glory to be revealed.

Let’s flip the switch a little and talk about the second part of this scripture reading. They had probably spent the night on that mountain top savoring the glory of that experience. But, when they came down from the mountain, a great crowd met Jesus. Immediately a man shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.” A spirit which the disciples, who did not go to the mountain top with Jesus, tried to cast out, possessed this child. The disciples could not cast it out. Jesus’ response sounds a little harsh to me, what about you? There is a note of frustration and irritability in his response. It causes me to wonder why that would be.

Was Jesus rebuking the disciples as a “faithless and perverse generation” or was it the crowds that frustrated him? Maybe it was both, maybe his frustration came from the fact that he had just left the company of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets in Hebrew Scripture. They had just discussed with him his own exodus from the world, maybe he was just a little annoyed that after that mountain-top-experience when he was filled with glory and the power of the spirit, he had to come back down to a ministry that was difficult and frustrating, faithless and perverse.

You can understand his frustration with the disciples, the power of the spirit filled them, and they had only a short while earlier been able to, on their own, cast out demons and heal the sick. But, after a day when they were not in Jesus’ presence, they now were unable to access God’s healing power in that manner. The glory of Jesus’ presence had faded, like the story of Moses when he covered his face with a veil to hide the fact God’s glory was fading. Jesus’ words demonstrate his true humanity when they express frustration and impatience with

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his disciples' inability to maintain that connection with the Spirit and God's generative power.

I guess you can also understand Jesus' frustration when he is so quickly faced with despair, death, and demonic possession after the high of his experience on the mountain-top and his transfiguration. Just as Peter, on the mountain top might have wanted to preserve the experience by building three shelters, Jesus may have also wanted to hold on to the glow of that transformative experience for just a while longer.

There might be a cause to wonder why the disciples were unable to heal the boy. According to Guy Griffith, in a Pastoral Perspective on this passage, the process of creating disciples occurs over the long haul with mountain tops and valleys – spiritual formation does not happen overnight.¹ The disciples had not yet reached full maturity in their spiritual formation and had not yet realized what they could do with God's power within them. That would come soon enough as they continued to travel with Jesus toward Jerusalem, and as they see Jesus' glory on a different hilltop.

Nevertheless, whether frustrated or not, Jesus called the boy to him and rebuked the "unclean spirit" healing the boy to return to his father – all were astounded at the greatness of God. The work of liberation, healing, justice, and redemption must continue, and that work is often down and dirty without reward. Even as Jesus had the experience of glory and divine, he had to come down from that mountain and face the real-life day to day struggles humans must face. One day the Spirit fills and energizes you for your Christian vocation and the next you come up empty and frustrated.

It makes me wonder how Jesus sustained himself with all the highs and lows of his ministry and why the disciples had problems maintaining that connection to God's power. There is, however, an important clue in our reading this morning. Notice what is in the first verse of our reading – "Jesus took with him Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying. . ." While Jesus was praying something amazing happened, prayer is significant in Jesus' life. In Luke's Gospel, prayer marks the decisive moments in Jesus' ministry. For the rest of us, prayer is how we maintain our connection to God's power and strength.

Going backward just a bit – our reading states these things transpire about eight days after Peter declares Jesus the Messiah and Jesus warns them what must happen to him. The disciples did have their own experiences of driving out demons and curing diseases. The first verse of the chapter of Luke we are in

¹ Guy D. Griffith. "Luke 9:28-43a – Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Gospels Luke. Vol 1*. Eds. Jarvis & Johnson. WJK. 2014. Print. 266-270

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begins with “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases.” Then we learn that some question Jesus’ identity, even Herod was curious and tried to meet Jesus. The disciples had recently witnessed Jesus turning five loaves and two fishes to food enough for five thousand. Who is this man?

Nowhere in Luke’s Gospel is the narrative more focused on Jesus’ identity than right there on the mountain top. The appearance of Moses and Elijah is significant – not only as two who had experienced God intimately, but also as signs pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. Moses symbolizes the law and Elijah the prophets illustrating that Jesus is the one to whom both the law and the prophets point to as the Messiah. It is significant too that Peter, James, and John although sleepy remained awake to witness Jesus’ glory – it was not a vision – they were fully awake and aware of what they were seeing. When the voice from the cloud came and overshadowed them it was a voice clearly heard – “This is my son, my chosen; listen to him!” There could be no doubt, but they kept silent and did not tell anyone about their experience.

Even the fact that Peter wanted to make three dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was significant – he recognized who was with Jesus, he had some idea the magnitude of what they were experiencing although his words illustrate his cluelessness about how to handle the situation. How could he hold on and prolong that experience when there was still work to do, when so many needed Jesus’ presence. Peter may have been confused and in awe, but it wasn’t so “stupid” of him to want to hold on to what was happening – some mountain top experiences are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that we would like to preserve.

We can have, the church can have mountain top experiences – when a worship service or message is memorable, at Christmas or Easter when the voices of the choir are sweet and melodious – but eventually it is back into the valley where the work of mission and ministry is sometimes hard and frustrating, and ordinariness sets in. We cannot stay on that mountain top – we cannot build dwellings to hold on to the divine experiences up there. Most of the work in God’s kingdom occurs on the plain level ground, in the space where despair, death, and demonic possessions exist. The mundane valleys are as important to the experience of a living Christ as the mountain tops.

As one scholar puts it “Whether it is oppressive demons of poverty and addiction, or the evil spirits of narcissism and self-reliance, Christians are called to face the power of evil in a hostile and skeptical world”² Don’t you think that would make some Christians and some church leaders feel a bit frustrated and

² Paul Galbreath. “Luke 9:28-43a – Homiletical Perspective” *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol. 1.* eds Jarvis & Johnson. WJK. 2014 Print. 266-271

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peevish – much like Jesus? And how do we, as Christian followers of Jesus, hold on to our connectedness to God’s strength, power, and greatness. What causes us to lose that connection?

I wonder if some of us get frustrated with the valley experiences, we want to dwell on those mountain tops and continually experience the divine, so we shut out the others who continually need help and support. We close ourselves off, feeling dragged down and put upon by the needs of a broken world. Compassion fatigue and apathy set in. We do things in a rote manner focusing on what we think is duty and on the process of “doing the work of the church” rather than focusing on experiencing a living Christ through mission and ministry. We lose our connectedness to God when we quit talking to God, quit looking for God, and quit spending time with God; we stop growing in spiritual maturity.

Paul’s words to the people of Corinth remind us of the transformation and illumination that comes from being in the presence of the glory of the Lord. Christ has set aside the veil that shields us from God’s glory. “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.” Through the glory of God, revealed in Jesus Christ we find that connectedness that is so essential to our faith and to our experience of a living Christ in the mundane valleys of our world.

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday; we begin our journey of Lent – during that time we come down off the mountain top and back into the valleys. We will spend our time thinking about what Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice was like. In our Sunday School Bible Study, we will Journey through the Psalms, and our Wednesday Bible Study will focus on Jesus’ death and resurrection in a five-week study preparing us for Easter. For us to tap into the strength and power of God’s presence we must spend time there. So today I challenge each of you to commit to a time of daily devotions, maybe even only 10 – 15 minutes each day when you have some time [upon rising, during commercial breaks or before bed] and spend time with God. I have some notebooks on the back table, take one and record your prayers, thoughts, or questions – read your bible and record your learning. Make this your Lenten practice and see if you can’t also, like Jesus’ disciples, tap into God’s power to find peace and strength for your journey.