

Luke 9:28-36 (NRSV)

The Transfiguration

(Mt 17.1—8; Mk 9.2—8; 2 Pet 1.16—18)

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.

What We Saw; What We Missed

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: Luke 9:28-36

I recall the day as though it were yesterday. By now the crowds were weighing in on us every day. It seems everyone in every little village had heard of the Galilean teacher. Every day it was the same. We would move from a little town in the morning at daybreak. Even so early in the morning many would follow us. As we proceeded, others would join in. And then as we approached the next village, they would stream out to meet us. They wanted to lay their eyes on him. They seemed to know that one day they would tell their grandchildren, "Oh yes, I saw him once. He was leather-skinned from the desert wind and sun. He had no uniform like the Roman guard, no finery like the priests. But even in rags he was a king. You could tell." That's what they'd say. And if that's what they told their grandchildren, well then, of course they were right.

But back to my story. Every day they pressed in on us. Some to catch a glance. Some to be made well. Even a few authorities came out to dispute with him. The crush of the crowd was close and sweaty and demanding. So, when it was possible, he would escape with a few of us, away to some remote spot, where he could pray. That's another thing I'll never forget. No matter how crazy things got, no matter how tired he was, he always wanted to pray. It seemed as necessary as breathing for him. For a man who loved to be in the presence of even the most unappealing people, he loved equally his private times of solitude praying in the remote highlands.

Ah, but again, I am distracting myself from my story. On the day of which I am speaking, we had begun the long trek toward Jerusalem. The crowds, as I say, were growing. There were more inquisitors, too. The tension seemed to be growing every day. There I go again. If I didn't know better, I'd say I don't really want to tell you about that day. But I do. I'm sure I do.

It was about 2:00 in the afternoon. After a late lunch, many were resting in what shade they could find. He tapped me and James and John and motioned to the rocky mountain just behind us. We were gathered at its base. Quietly we got up and walked away unnoticed. Soon we were in among the desert brush. The way was steep and hot and dry. The dust would puff up around our feet at every step. The brush would grab our tunics and just as often scrape the bare skin of our legs and ankles.

Finally, we cleared the summit, worn out and stinging from the scratches. Thankfully, there was a bit of shade, and the three of us slumped within its cover. But he kept going a short way off, to pray. I couldn't understand how he had the energy for it. None of the rest of us could keep our eyes open. They kept drifting shut in that way your eyes do when no matter how hard you try you can't force yourself to keep them open. I honestly don't know if I had dosed off, or if I had, for how long. But suddenly I was so startled there was no way I could keep my eyes shut. I had looked over toward where Jesus went to pray, and I'm telling this as an honest man, and a sober one, too, and also as a man with all his faculties. There he was. His whole face

glowed while he was praying. His clothes, turned pure white. Our clothes were never pure white out in the wilderness, even after we washed them in the river, and that was a pretty rare event. So, there he is glowing, and his clothes are bright white, and then we saw two other people with him. We recognized them immediately; although we had never seen them before. They were, believe it or not, Moses and Elijah.

You know, it's funny. At that time in history Moses and Elijah were the most revered figures in all of Israel. They were our prophets and our ancestors. Jesus was attracting a lot of crowds, but he was nothing then compared to Moses and Elijah. And now, there they were, side by side with Jesus, talking to one another, if you can believe it. It hit me right there. We knew Jesus was a heavyweight, alright. But now it was clear he was much more than a heavyweight. He was on par with Moses and Elijah.

What I did next has gotten a lot of notoriety over the years. I said, "Let's build three booths, three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. The Gospel of Luke says I didn't know what I was saying, and that's actually right. But it's not for the reasons a lot of people have said over the years. If I got it wrong, so did a lot of others. A lot of others who thought they were a lot smarter than me.

A lot of people have said I was a fool because I put Moses and Elijah on the same level with Jesus. Now, I have to admit that we who followed him missed a lot. We didn't have the benefit of 20-20 hindsight. Sure, later on people all say how great Jesus was, the son of God and all. But remember, we were the ones who were out in our boats working when he came by. We were the ones who dropped it all and followed him on a hunch as much as anything else. We saw quite a bit in him, I'd say, and sometimes I'd like to ask all of those who think we were too thick to get Jesus, I'd like to ask them if they would have gotten out of their boats, left everything behind and followed an unkempt itinerant teacher, dressed in rags, no resume, no Gospel stories, no church to tell you who he was.

Well, we did miss some things. But one thing I can tell you is that on that day when I thought he was as important as Moses and Elijah, I don't think anyone would have accused me of selling Jesus short. If anything, they would have called me a heretic for putting him on the same plane as the other two. Whew. I'm glad to get that off my chest. I guess I had more feelings about being made out the fool of the story than I realized, at least for the things I was no fool at all.

Well, in the end, I'm sure I was a fool, but not for the reasons people said. And I'll tell you what, a lot of people who came after me were fools, too, maybe bigger fools than me. I said, Let's build three tents or booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Afterwards a lot of people began to read a lot more into what I said than they should have. Or at least they read in it a lot more than I meant. They looked in their Greek dictionary and realized that the word for tents was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when they were talking about the booths built at the harvest festival of tabernacles. Then they asked themselves, What the heck was Peter thinking when he wanted to build booths for the feast of tabernacles for Moses, Elijah and Jesus? They said to themselves, That doesn't make any sense. Peter was talking nonsense. And then they see that Luke says that I didn't know what I said. So they then conclude that I was so confused that I made some idiotic suggestion that we have a harvest festival up on top of the mountain in the desert.

Let me be clear. I am not the idiot in this little misunderstanding. I never mentioned the

feast of tabernacles. I never meant to mention it. I was talking about the tents or booths that our ancestors from the time of Abraham lived in in the desert, the homes of our ancestors. If the smarty-pants who think I'm the fool had looked at their Greek dictionaries with a little more care, maybe they would have seen that. Gees, a harvest festival on a mountain top in the middle of the desert. I ask you, who's the fool in that story?

Like I said, we saw a lot that day. James and John and I got Jesus. We saw that he was right up there with Moses and Elijah. And I just wanted to do the right thing. I wanted them to have tents, shelters, homes. I thought they deserved that much. I wanted to show them how much we respected them and honored them. That's it, plain and simple. Period. End of story.

Well, it's not quite that plain and simple. That's what I've come to tell you about today. It's not quite that simple, and it's certainly not the end of the story. I did want to honor them. And I wanted that moment on the mountain to last forever. I wanted to build them booths, homes, so we could all stay on the mountain forever wrapped in that glorious moment. Why wouldn't I? What more was there? This was the pinnacle, the mountaintop, so to speak.

I was partly right, you know. No sooner had I shouted, "Let's build some tents," than a mist came over everything, so you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. And then there came a voice, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" I don't think there can be any doubt that we had reached the mountaintop, spiritually speaking.

Well my detractors think this is another way that I got everything wrong. With their smug looks they say, You can't stay on the mountain forever. I guess they mean something like the Buddhists do with impermanence. Things change. Some days things are great; you're on the mountain. Some days, though, you have to slog through the valley where things are hard and messy. Well, of course that's true. But to tell you the truth, that's not really the big point. We didn't need Moses and Elijah and Jesus to tell us that life has its ups and downs. And for all the flaws I have, I wasn't really saying, Let's stay up here on top of the world.

Well, maybe I was saying something like that. Maybe I was saying that I wanted to have it good all the time. But that wasn't my biggest mistake. Or maybe it's better to say that it wasn't my only mistake.

Think of it this way. The way I saw things, up there on the mountain was about as good as it gets. It was 100% good. And down in the valley, the percentages aren't so good. There's a lot you have to put up with. You know, life. Some days maybe 10% is good. On a good day maybe it gets, oh I don't know, 50% or 60%, maybe even better. But the way I saw it, off the mountain a pretty high percentage was not that great.

But Jesus, the one the cloud just told us to listen to, kept telling us something that we didn't ever grasp very well until much later. We kept trying to get where things were holy—on the mountain, up in heaven, you know. And he kept telling us that down in the valley was the kingdom of God just as much as on the mountain. Even now the idea is elusive to me. But he was saying something like, Even in the pain of living, if you can shift your gaze, you will see that it is all holy and sacred. I wish I could find better words for it.

Let me try this. I spent all my time with Jesus, and I wasn't alone in this, trying to get the good experiences and prevent the bad ones, or at least what I thought were the good and bad ones. I wanted to earn my way to the 100% good stuff. So, whenever things were different from how I wanted them to be, they were bad, as far as I was concerned. But Jesus was trying to tell us not to struggle so much to make things the way we think we want them or think need them to

be.

Let's say you're down here in the valley thinking that you need a good job, a big house, a pretty new car, a good relationship, and good health in order to be happy. So you work real hard trying to get them. And guess what? Lots of times you can't have all you want, so you're unhappy, wishing to be up on that mountain where everything goes right. Then, maybe, one day you get most of the stuff, and you look around and realize, Hey, this doesn't feel as good as I thought it would, either.

So, Jesus says, Well, why don't you try something a little different? Why don't you look around at what's holy and sacred in every day, down in the valley? Pretty soon you begin to realize that the things that really matter, that you really need, are right there before your eyes, down in the valley, down where you don't have everything great happening. You can be sick and poor and still feel the spirit of God stirring. You can be sad and at the same time feel the holy all around you. You don't have to be up on the mountain to see that everything is bright white when you see it in the light of God. Do you see what I mean?

And then one more thing often happens. I was a pretty angry and jealous guy. If things weren't going my way, I would be mad at John, or the Samaritans, or the gentiles, or somebody. I even left Jesus when he failed my expectations. You know, it's surely been repeated often enough, how I said three times that night, "I don't know the man." Angry people blame each other. They hurt each other. They resent each other. And, of course, that makes things down off the mountain worse and worse. But when you see that the holy is around you all the time, in every particle of the universe, in the person next to you, in your friend and your enemy, in health and in sickness, then it is much easier to find compassion and forgiveness. Think what realizing that everything and everyone is hold could do for the world.

That's the part we missed, and I admit, it's not always easy to see even now. But that's what Jesus wanted us to see more than anything else. It wasn't that he wanted us to come down from the holy mountain into a valley of misery. He wanted us to know that the whole thing, all of it, was holy. It's all the kingdom of God. See that and suddenly nothing looks the same, he said. For see that and life itself is transfigured. It shines as brightly as the garments I saw on the mountain, that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were wearing that day long ago. That's what I've come to tell you today. As Jesus would say, those who have ears, listen. Amen.