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Luke 9:28–36

29th Message

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A MOUNTAIN OF REVELATION

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

This Memorial Day weekend we remember those who have answered the call to protect their homeland and have given their life in doing so. It is a high calling and we do right to honor them.

Last week we reflected on a high calling of a different kind. The words of Jesus ring in our ears that all who wish to come after him must be willing and ready to deny themselves and take up their crosses daily; to lose our life for his sake is the only way to save it. This exhortation was not the final word however, Jesus finished his discourse by saying,

“But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:27).

Today we will read how that promise was fulfilled.

“Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.” (Luke 9:28)

By stating “after these sayings” Luke is tying what happens next on this mountain directly to what was said eight days earlier. The backdrop is Jesus asking his disciples, “who do you say that I am?” and Peter, speaking for the Twelve, declaring “you are the Christ of God.”

Their declaration is correct, but their understanding of the true path of the Messiah is woefully incomplete, so Jesus enlightens them by saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.” (Luke 9:22)

With all that is ahead of him, it is no wonder Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray and takes along those who know him best, Peter, James and John. Early tradition tells us that this mountain is either Mt. Hermon or Mt. Tabor. Either way, as we read this, our expectations are high because throughout the Old Testament important things happen up on the mountains. And in the Gospel of Luke, when prayer is mentioned, something significant usually follows. This will be no exception.

“And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:29-31)

As Jesus was praying, he was physically transformed into a radiant figure. The change in the appearance of Jesus’ face is reminiscent of how Moses’ face shone brightly after his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35). But the description of the change in Jesus exceeds that of Moses, for Jesus’ glorious splendor extends even to his clothes which become a dazzling white (literally “bright like lightning”).

Suddenly Moses and Elijah appear by his side. Many suggest that Jesus was shining brightly because he was divine, but Luke reports

that in this holy moment Moses and Elijah also “appeared in glory.” I believe this “dazzling” state is what awaits all of God’s people when we enter into the glorious presence of God in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus himself said, in Matthew’s Gospel, that at the end of the age, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43). This is what we see here, all three of them are shining like the sun.

The conversation among the three gives us an indication as to why it was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus. Luke tells us they spoke about Jesus’ “departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The word “departure” is literally “exodus,” and refers to all that Jesus had mentioned to his disciples that “must” happen—that he would suffer, be rejected, killed, and raised up on the third day. What is mentioned for the first time here is that Jerusalem, home of the Sanhedrin, “the elders, chief priests, and scribes” (Luke 9:22), will be the location where all this will happen.

The word exodus, of course, reminds us of the exodus led by Moses when God liberated his people from bondage in Egypt. By using that word Luke evokes in his readers the question, “I wonder what liberation Jesus will bring for God’s people through his exodus?”

Moses and Elijah are commonly interpreted as embodying “the Law and the Prophets.” Since Jesus was the one to fulfill both the law and the prophecies, it is fitting that Moses, through whom the law was given, and Elijah, the great prophet, should appear in this context.

Jesus’ emphasis on accomplishing or fulfilling all that was written in the law of Moses and the prophets becomes more apparent as the Gospel of Luke progresses.

In just a few weeks from this moment on the mountain Jesus will confirm to his twelve disciples, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished” (Luke 18:31).

After his death and resurrection, Jesus instructs the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27).

Later that same day, Jesus said to his disciples, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44).

This mountain-top experience was preparing Jesus to follow where the law and prophets had pointed. The presence of Moses and Elijah must have been a tremendous blessing and encouragement for Jesus as he approached the excruciating path of suffering ahead of him.

This encounter, up to this point, is for Jesus. All the focus has been on him, but now Luke opens up the lens wider and we see that this is for the benefit of the disciples too.

“Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said.” (Luke 9:32-33)

After a time, possibly due to the overwhelmingly bright light nearby, the disciples wake up. When they become fully aware of their surroundings, they see the kingdom of God revealed in glory just as Jesus had promised a week earlier. Paying close attention, Peter notices that Moses and Elijah are about to leave and he has a suggestion, “Master, it is good that James, John, and I are here. Let the three of us build three tents, three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter’s instincts were not bad. He wants to prolong and commemorate this holy moment. His response was correct for the old-covenant, the old way, but he speaks in ignorance. He is not aware of the implications of what he is saying, because the three are not equals. Peter is applying old theology to a new situation. He is trying to force new wine into an old wineskin. He doesn’t know what he is saying, because with Jesus comes a new period, a new configuration of God’s people, a new path to God. The old has gone, the new has come.

Peter rushes too quickly to assess the situation. Instead of simply observing the glory and quietly appreciating the mystery, he tries to take charge and winds up speaking prematurely. He speaks without comprehending the moment.

I can relate to Peter in this way, particularly in my efforts as a pastor. Instead of remaining quiet and appreciating the mystery of the many ways God reveals himself, I find myself far too often jumping the gun and trying not only to manage the expression of God but also influence the way others experience him. Have you ever done that? Silence may make us uncomfortable, but if we are not silent, how will we ever hear the voice of God?

It is a good lesson for me to learn, and one I hope you do too. When the glory and majesty of God breaks into our world, into our experience, when he reveals himself to us in some small or big way silence is an appropriate response. It can be our most authentic form of worship.

Peter will learn to be silent before God, and he will learn that the kingdom of God is not represented equally by Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. As a matter of fact, this moment was not about Moses and Elijah at all, but being attentive to just one.

“As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!’” (Luke 9:34-35)

While Peter was still talking a cloud comes on the scene and overshadows the participants. The cloud signifies God’s presence and recalls the time of the Exodus when a cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The disciples knew this, and they also knew that when the cloud settled on the tabernacle Moses was not able to enter it (Exodus 40:34-35), so no wonder the disciples were afraid as the cloud enveloped them.

In this holy moment of mystery and glory, the divine voice from the cloud speaks. This is a moment that needs only a few words, and those words are “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”

This is one of only two places that “heaven” speaks directly about Jesus. The first is at Jesus’ baptism prior to his undertaking of the Galilean ministry. The second, here, is the Transfiguration before he begins the difficult path to Jerusalem. In both scenes, the heavenly voice identifies Jesus as “Son.” At the baptism the Father says “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22), and here at the transfiguration he identifies Jesus as “my Chosen One”.

Only eight days earlier the disciples declared Jesus to be “the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20), and here they receive a divine confirmation. To the ears of the disciples at this time, this was not a declaration of Jesus’ divinity, but of his kingship. The divine voice confirms for the disciples that Jesus is the longed for son of King David and heir to all of the Davidic promises. He is the Chosen One, the Anointed One. He is the promised Messiah who will bring deliverance and salvation to all God’s people.

This declaration from God the Father is the climax of this whole scene, and the exclamation point of it all is his command to the disciples to “listen” to Jesus. Their role is not just to serve as witnesses to this glorious event, but to receive and obey a divine command.

Though it may be hard for them to understand, the difficult path for Jesus that lies ahead is the path of the Chosen One. The disciples need instruction. They need to talk less and listen to Jesus more, because much of what they hear they do not expect nor understand right away. If the disciples are to understand his path and follow in his footsteps, they will need to listen to him. It may go against everything they expect from the Messiah, but they must pay attention, for he is teaching them something new and important.

Their tendency is to assume they know who Jesus is and what he is about, but there are some surprises coming. Jesus’ “exodus” is just around the corner, and the disciples have a lot to learn before they can carry out their mission in his absence.

As if to emphasize that the teaching of Jesus alone is what must be followed, we are given one final scene.

“And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.” (Luke 9:36)

The voice from heaven does not command, “Listen to *them*,” but “Listen to *him*.” Moses and Elijah are gone and only Jesus remains. Jesus fulfills the law of Moses and the prophets, and his word reigns supreme.

With a deep awareness of the magnitude of what they had just experienced, the disciples, uncharacteristically, respond with silence. They have just been given the command to “listen,” and it appears here at the outset that they are willing to do just that.

These three disciples remain silent about this event for years. They won’t truly understand it all until the Spirit is given at Pentecost and the eyes of their heart are enlightened. Once they *do* understand it, it becomes an important element in their apostolic résumé and a powerful confirmation in their testimony that Jesus is Lord.

Years after the transfiguration, as Peter was preparing for his own exodus, he wrote,

“And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic

Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.” (2Pet. 1:15-18)

The disciples both saw and heard divine confirmation from God the Father that Jesus is Lord. Make no mistake, he is the beloved Son of God. Without question, the transfiguration served as an encouragement to Jesus and as confirmation to the disciples that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. In spite of his path of suffering, rejection, and death there will also be resurrection and glory.

The transfiguration scene offers an important parallel and contrast to the crucifixion. Tom Wright describes this perfectly, “Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame. Here his clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off. Here he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, he is flanked by two brigands. Here, a bright cloud overshadows the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land. The mountain-top explains the hill-top—and vice versa. Perhaps we only really understand either of them when we see it side by side with the other.”¹

Death is not the final word. It is because of Jesus’ exodus that we are liberated from the bondage of sin and death. Our salvation is found in Christ alone.

The transfiguration was a sign of God’s grace and compassion. When times got difficult for the disciples as they followed Jesus, the memory of their encounter with God and his testimony about Jesus, helped them stay on the path. They were given a vision of life after death, the glory that awaits all God’s people. It does the same for us. We, too, are comforted to know that no matter what price we pay in following Jesus, we will enjoy life after death with him.

We not only eagerly await the day of his second coming, when we will be like him (1 John 3:2), but we rejoice right now because in the present moment, as children of God, we are being transformed into his image, radiating his glory in and through the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

As the Apostle Paul wrote,

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:1-18)

The way of discipleship, the path of “denying ourselves, taking up our cross,” the path of self-denial, suffering, and surrender, is so foreign to us, so outside the bent of our flesh that we must constantly listen to his voice, submit ourselves to his teaching and correction, and surrender ourselves to the transforming work of the Spirit within us.

How do we follow Jesus? We listen to him! How are you doing in listening to God? The Bible makes it clear that Jesus has “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68), and Jesus himself said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31). That is how we walk along this new way, we meditate on his word night and day, we listen to what he says to us, and, in the strength and faith he provides, we obey.

Jesus was a constant example to us in the way of listening. One of the significant details of this story that is unique to Luke’s account is that it occurs in the context of prayer. Jesus had gone up on the mountain specifically to pray, and it was while Jesus was praying that his transfiguration occurs. His time of prayer was an essential part of his intimacy with his Father and foundational in both receiving and carrying out his Father’s will.

What was necessary for Jesus is even more necessary for us. In prayer we must learn not only to offer our petitions to God, but to also offer our silence. Reflective silence in prayer is a great way of simply placing all our attention on God, listening to him with humility, and enjoying the gift of his presence with us. May the Lord open our ears to his voice, and may we listen with all our hearts!

1. Wright, N.T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 14-15.

