

Luke 9:28-36

Listen to Him

February 14, 2021

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At the end of every week, I usually touch bases with the person who does the lion's share of our social media posts. She likes it if I give her the scripture and sermon title, and a sentence or two about where the sermon is going, so she can post about it. Some weeks that is easier than others. This week, I messaged her: "Luke 9, Sermon title: Listen to Him. It's the story of Jesus' transfiguration, which is a super weird story." She replied, "Can I really say that?" I messaged her back, "Yes. Because it's true." It feels a little shallow to introduce this story by simply saying, it's weird. But it is. It's also an important story in Luke's narrative. It is a turning point in the story, a transition from one way of seeing Jesus to another, and this new way involves some pretty amazing special effects.

This is the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus told in Luke 9:28-36:

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.

Because of the extraordinary things Jesus had done, there was a lot of murmuring about who, exactly, Jesus was. Earlier in chapter 9, Herod wondered who this man was that he had heard so much about. And later, Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They told him some people thought he was John

the Baptist, some people thought he was Elijah, or another prophet. But when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was, Peter said, “The Messiah of God.” For the author of Luke, the answer to “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?” was given in this story.

The transfiguration story is an example of a theophany, which simply means, God showed up. Here, God both showed up *to* Jesus and *in* Jesus—on a mountain (God likes to show up on mountains) Recall God appeared to both Elijah (1 Kings 19) and Moses (Exodus 33) in the Hebrew Bible on a mountain top. I don’t think that part of the story is so hard for us to imagine. The idea of experiencing God in the vastness of nature is familiar to a lot of people. There is no doubt that God meets us in creation...mountains, beaches, hummingbird feeders...God is there. In this story, Luke uses shiny Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and a voice from the cloud to make God known.

Up until now in Luke’s narrative, he has been pretty subtle about his understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. There is nothing subtle about this mountaintop story though. In that moment, Jesus became a beacon, like a lighthouse on a dark shore. And Peter, James, and John had a front row seat to the whole thing. The three disciples were sleepy, but their reward for staying awake was the chance to see this spectacular scene. Not only was Jesus dazzling white, probably almost glittery, but he was joined by Elijah and Moses. In Luke’s narrative, the disciples saw some weird stuff, but this was the weirdest so far: way weirder even than healings, calming a storm, even weirder than when Jesus raised the widow’s son from death. They were mesmerized.

I think it would be meaningful to think about a time when God has shown up in a way that caused you to stop in your tracks, see or understand clearly the presence of God. There is the temptation to allow big stories like this, with its crazy special effects, to diminish our own God experiences. Let’s not do that. We don’t need shiny Jesus on a mountain, we need God to show up for us in other ways.

This week, I saw God show up for a family on a miserably cold day at a graveside. We stood around the grave, I said some words, we listened to “How Great Thou Art,” and one of the sons knelt and put his mother’s ashes in the ground. It was so real and raw and beautiful. I thought about how some of today’s practices around death have a way of distancing us from it. The funeral home does it all for us and

we can walk away, never having to physically touch death. My experience has been that God shows up in the moments when we have no choice, we have to touch or experience hard things. And for me, the glory of God is more about that than shiny Jesus...and those moments are every bit as miraculous.

Back on the mountain, Peter's response to what was happening, at first glance, may seem a little strange. My loose translation of Peter's words is, "Let's stay here and build 3 shelters, one for each of you." Peter often said the first, unfiltered thing that came to his mind. But this time, I completely understand it. I think he wanted to sort of bottle what he was feeling. I don't think he wanted to keep Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in a tent forever. I think Peter wanted to capture the holy in that moment. The problem with trying to capture the holy is two-fold: first, we can't. And second, trying to capture it, distracts us from experiencing it. Like when we try to capture, on camera, a special occasion and fixate on getting just the right pictures, rather than being present, experiencing the moment. I think Peter was feeling the holiness and wanted that feeling to stay.

Before Jesus could respond, the voice of God said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." Listen to him. We've heard this voice before, at Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And here on the mountain, God once again claimed Jesus as God's own and, this time, affirmed Jesus' authority as well, "Listen to him."

Luke places this story right before the narrative takes a turn when Jesus physically turns toward Jerusalem, toward the very thing Jesus, Elijah and Moses talked about on the mountain: Jesus' departure, his death. There isn't much time. Listen to him.

Well, what has Jesus said? So far, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has shown his disciples, and by extension, us, some important things about what the kin-dom of God is like. When he called his disciples to be fishers of people, he said, Together, we will be about the work of "catching" (bringing to justice) the ones who use their wealth, privilege, and power to oppress the ones who are vulnerable. When he allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath and when he healed on the Sabbath, he said: People who are suffering should not have to suffer, even one more day. And when he healed the centurion's slave and raised the widow's son from death, he said: God's compassion is for everyone. Listen to him.

As we move into the season of Lent, what might God be saying to you through the stories of Jesus, through the stories of your neighbors, through your own story and the ways God shows up for you? I know many of you are thinking about what you might give up or take on for the Lent. I don't want to discourage you in any way from doing what you need to do for you. However, more important than what you will give up or take on is who you will become. Let me encourage you to reflect on who you would like to be at the end of Lent. What would you like to see in the mirror on Easter morning? How will your connection to God, to others, and to who you were created to be, be different?

To be clear, the world doesn't need more people giving up chocolate or running an extra mile. The world needs you to show up, to be who you were created to be. Because the truth is, there is nothing more beautiful and more dazzling than when we live into the reflections of God we are. This weird story of Jesus' transfiguration teaches us that God shows up to us and in us. Let this Lent be about that. Be transfigured, dear ones...be a beacon, a lighthouse for the ones who feel lost in the darkness of a frigid winter, a relentless pandemic, and a world in which justice for the most vulnerable is still very much a work in progress. Amen.