

# Wading River Congregational Church

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## SERMONS IN PRINT

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ECUMENICAL LENTEN SERVICE



Luke 9:22-36

*"Glory and Suffering"*

"The power and the glory," meets the lost and the least. At the turning point of the Gospel narratives, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, but Jesus then begins to teach the Twelve that he must suffer, die and rise again. The second act of the great drama begins, as Jesus leaves Galilee and starts his journey towards Jerusalem.

### 1) *Revelation of Glory*

But before he does, a remarkable event occurs, right on the heels of Peter's confession and Jesus' "First Announcement of the Passion." Jesus has said that some of his hearers will "see the kingdom come in power." Nobody has any idea what he means, but a few days later he leads Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. In a terrifying and confusing moment, he is suddenly transformed before their eyes; his clothes shine with a brilliance they have never seen before. He is accompanied by the figures of Moses and Elijah, and the *shekinah*-glory - the cloud of God's presence - descends on the mountain. A voice from heaven says: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

It is called "the Transfiguration," and it came later to be understood as a moment when Jesus is revealed in his glory; when to a few

people, he is revealed as he truly is. The Galilean peasant is revealed as the incarnate Son of God. Moses and Elijah come from the realms of glory to attest that the Law and the Prophets pointed towards this man and this moment. We read that they "spoke about *his departure* which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem." Their topic is Jesus' suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension. They speak about the way Jesus' glory will be revealed in his suffering and his rising.

### 2) *Glory and Suffering*

Here is that great enigma, the mystery that is at the heart of the gospel: that God's plan to redeem a fallen world involved the suffering of his Son. Nobody understood this, and even Jesus' closest disciples could not grasp it. Peter had rebuked Jesus for even suggesting it. On the mountain of Transfiguration, Peter is overwhelmed with confusion, and can only suggest building three "*sukkah*" for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But the revelation of glory is soon to be over, and they have to descend the mountain. Jesus again speaks about dying and rising, but Peter, James and John are simply confused. They question Jesus about Elijah's return, and are told that he has indeed "returned" in the figure of John the Baptist, who has been imprisoned and killed at the

whim of Herod Antipas and his vicious wife. Suffering at the hands of the “powers-that-be” is what God’s messengers and God’s Son can expect in their mission to save a fallen world.

Coming down the mountain - never a good experience - is a reminder of what Moses found when he came down from Mt. Sinai. Down in the valley, there is chaos, suffering and unbelief. The remaining nine Apostles have proved incapable of the ministry Jesus had sent them out on just a few months earlier. They cannot deliver a demon-possessed boy; his father is exasperated; Jesus is called for, and he frees the suffering boy and his fearful father with his faltering faith.

And then Jesus turns and starts resolutely on his journey toward Jerusalem. On the road, the Twelve are deep in conversation. Jesus tells them once again that he will suffer, be handed over to the authorities and be killed, and rise again after three days. But they cannot grasp what he means, they are unwilling and afraid to ask, they fall to arguing among themselves. Their issue: “who among them is the greatest?” No wonder at times Jesus calls them a “faithless and unbelieving people” and asks “how long must I put up with you?”

So he places a child in their midst, and says “look at him... he is of no account to you, just a child... but you must be willing to serve insignificant people like him.” Neither Jews nor the Greco-Roman culture thought much of children; to make a child an example, to set him up as someone whose needs were to be served, was to overturn the entire structure of the family and household. Children were no better than slaves - indeed in Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, we are told, the same word could mean child or slave - but Jesus insists that “great” disciples must accept and embrace children and slaves as

equals and as people worthy of attention. If you want to be great in Jesus’ kingdom, you have to lose your self-importance; because when you welcome and embrace the lowest and the neediest and the unimportant, you embrace Jesus himself.

### 3) *Feeling Great?*

So who is a good disciple of Jesus, then or now? The person who obeys God and listens to Jesus, the person who trusts Jesus even when they doubt and their loved ones suffer, the person who takes the servant’s role, the person who accepts that suffering is at the center of Jesus’ calling and at the center of his disciples’, too.

We don’t much like this definition of discipleship. We hate being told that to follow Jesus, we have to “take up our cross.” We rebel against suffering in all its forms - whether it’s being misunderstood, ignored, unvalued, found inadequate, or being the object of criticism. We dislike pain, weakness, fatigue. We complain and sometimes become embittered at our failing health and strength; or at the ways other people don’t notice us or care for us. We don’t expect to be short of money, or of a job, or of shelter or food (and if we are, then somebody else must be to blame - perhaps our spouses, or the government). If we feel low, it’s because some other person is not being sensitive to our need for attention.

What we want is to be “great” - to feel great, to look great, to be comfortable, to be cared for, to have our needs met. We want somebody to provide our food, do the laundry, take out the trash, pay the bills. We want well-paying and interesting jobs, attentive and affectionate spouses, obedient and over-achieving children. We want schools that teach what we want taught, children who achieve high test scores and play on winning teams, all at minimum

prices. We want safe communities, good pensions, good health care. We want affordable housing for our children and grandchildren, but not too much of it so that it affects our property values, or brings in too many undesirable people. We want good public services and good government and a say in what's happening in our communities. We want good highways, and light traffic.

We want it all, and we don't want to suffer. And the idea that Christians are called to be the servants of all is the last thing we want to hear. Too many Christians want to be the masters of all, not the servants. We have never grasped that at the center of the Christian gospel is the suffering and death of the Son of God: and if he suffered, what makes us think we will escape? If he came to give his life for us, why do we think the world owes us a comfortable living? When will we grasp that our calling is to serve one another, and him, just as he served us? When will we see that glory and greatness reside in serving the needs of others; in the kind of service that goes unnoticed, unpaid, un-thanked, unappreciated? – except by God our Father.

When will we accept that we have no right to our complaints and our criticisms, or expecting other people to do things for us? When will we start truly following the Lord whom we claim to trust? When will we see that in God's estimation, the great disciples are those who go about their business serving the needs of children and frail old people and sick people and dying people and needy people, and expecting no reward?

Greatness and suffering are linked in this fallen world. That is how redemption was won. "*No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown.*" So wrote the great Quaker leader William Penn in 1669. At some level we know it's true: "No pain, no gain," we say when we go to the

gym! But what we know to be true physically we must apply spiritually: we will grow in our faith, our belief will be strengthened, we will live in ways that are more worthy of Christ - *if* we will accept and embrace that the hard things in life, the suffering we go through, reaches us via the hands of a loving God who wants us to *grow toward spiritual maturity*, and to learn that suffering is something he uses in our lives to bring us to glory.

The three Apostles who saw Jesus' transfiguration caught a glimpse, a preview, of the glorious Lord who suffered, and died, and rose again; who because he suffered willingly, was taken up to glory and exalted at the right hand of his Father. So will we be, if we embrace him and his way to greatness and to glory.

Let us pray...

