

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 9:28-36 "They Saw His Glory"

Revelation occurs when God presents himself to human beings - by words, by actions, by events. In the nature of things, these encounters are from a human point of view awe-inspiring, fear-making, confusing. In the most dramatic encounter in the Gospels until the Resurrection, three of the Twelve - Peter, James and John - are called to hear God's answer to the questions about Jesus that everyone is asking in this middle section of the Gospels: "Who is this?" "What is he here to do?" "What does it mean to be his disciple?"

1) On The Mountain

The divine side of this encounter is clear from the setting. Men are taken up onto a mountain to meet God. There is prayer, there are bright shining lights, spiritual leaders from the past return in glorious splendor, a face and clothing are transformed as they reflect the presence of God, a cloud descends, the voice of God is heard. You half-expect to read that thunder and lightning and earthquake accompany "the descent of God"!

If this reminds you of Moses going up on Mt. Sinai, it should. Jesus has already revealed himself as the "prophet like Moses" who feeds his followers "bread from heaven," but he has also acknowledged that he is more than a prophet - he is the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One chosen by God.

And he has begun to explain just what the chosen "Servant of the LORD" will do to deliver his people. In short, a *New Exodus* is in view, with someone greater than Moses ready to lead God's people out of their slavery to sin and death.

This revelation is made in terms of "glory" - the bright majesty and awe-inspiring presence that is the very nature of God. Jesus is for a moment revealed to three chosen men as he really is; they see him for the first time not as the spirit-filled man from Nazareth, but glowing, shining from within, as the Son of God.

The human perspective on this encounter is of course very different. Peter, James and John are half-asleep! Perhaps they are weary from climbing the mountain? Or perhaps their sleepiness is a metaphor for their spiritual dullness! They cannot grasp what is going on, they are afraid as the cloud of God's presence overshadows them. As they begin to "awake" to the moment, Peter makes a confused proposal that the three men should build booths, shelters - *sukkah* - for the people they now recognize as Moses and Elijah, in their glory, speaking to Jesus in his. Did Peter want to prolong the encounter, to stay on the mountain? Did he have some vague sense that *Succoth*, the Feast of Tabernacles, spoke of God's provision in the desert and the future glory of his kingdom? Who knows? Did Peter? It seems doubtful!

But Peter's proposals are quickly interrupted by the voice from heaven: *"This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."* Here is the explanation in words of the events the men are witnessing – God the Father is validating his Son's identity and mission, and commanding Jesus' disciples to listen to what he says! Even at Jesus' baptism, when heaven had opened before, the words *"This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased"* were probably directed only to John the Baptist. Now Peter, James and John hear God speaking directly to them: *"This is my Son; listen to him."*

Years later, Peter wrote of this experience *"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain."* (2 Pet 1:16-18).

2) What Does It Mean?

What did it all mean? Jesus' true identity is revealed, and is validated by the voice from heaven. But what were the three Apostles to do with the instruction *"Listen to him"*?

The context for God's command lies, of course, in the things Jesus has been talking about. Luke shows us the connection when he introduces this narrative: *"about 8 days after this..."* After what? After Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus has shocked them by saying that the Christ *"must be rejected, must suffer, must die, must be raised again."* It's sometimes called *"the First Announcement of the Passion."* Jesus marks out his future in terms that nobody among his followers had dreamed of at this point;

and he is emphatic about it: the Messiah *must* suffer, *it is necessary*.

So eight days later, on a mountain, as he is Transfigured, Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah about – what? *"About his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem."* His *"departure"* – what is that? It was a word used as a euphemism for death, but it had an older resonance too: the actual word was *exodon* – they talked about Jesus' *"exodus."* The most important thing in the world for the two famous representatives of the Law and the Prophets to discuss with Jesus was *"his coming exodus."* Death and delivery, Moses and Jesus; it all comes together on a mountain in Galilee. Jesus, by his death soon to be *"accomplished"* in Jerusalem, will deliver his people from slavery to sin and death. Jesus' death will be no accident, no second thought after his message of the kingdom was rejected, but God's plan for a New Exodus brought about *"through the death of the firstborn at Passover."*

Jesus' glory and Jesus' death are always intertwined: he is revealed as the glorious Son so that it becomes clear why his death can achieve deliverance; and his glory will forever be that he, the Son of God, was willing to die for his people. *"Now the time has come,"* he said at the Last Supper; *"Father, glorify your Son."*

3) Listen To Him

But all this is *"theology."* The question for Peter, James, John, and all disciples from then 'til now is, of course *"so what does this mean for us?"*

The first response is of course to embrace that Jesus really was who he said he was. He was not just another prophet, not just a great teacher of morals, not just a great leader of the poor and marginalized, not just a man

who would overturn the religious and political establishments of his day – no, something more: the “Son of Man” as he called himself, the “Son of God” as the voice from heaven called him. This is the Jesus that Christians follow.

The second response to “what does this mean for us” is to hear God’s words: “This is my Son; *listen to him.*” Listen when he tells you to love God and love your neighbor, listen when he warns you not to gain the whole world and lose your own soul, listen when he says “take up your cross daily and follow me.” And listen when he says “It is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer and die and rise again.”

Why “must” he do that? Why is crucifixion and resurrection necessary? Whether we understand the Atonement as a victory over the powers of evil, as a substitutionary sacrifice, or as a moving example, we must understand and acknowledge that it was *necessary*. Jesus said he came “to die for his people.” And if we listen, we know we have to come to terms with the necessity of that.

Mostly we don’t like to think in these terms. We are comfortable with Jesus the teacher, the giver of the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule; we can follow a leader who (depending on our preferences) either requires a strict personal morality or extending ourselves to help the needy. But whether we are conservative or liberal by upbringing or temperament or conviction or experience, we are hardly pleased to be told that the founder of our faith had to die for us. That is a uniquely Christian claim, and one that can’t be left out on the “sawdust trail,” to evangelists who make emotional appeals to lost sinners to repent and believe in Jesus.

This is a central Christian claim that applies not just in revival meetings, but in

Congregational and Catholic churches, in suburbia, in the city, and in the country; it applies to educated affluent people as well as to people who never made it through high school, it applies to fathers as well as to mothers, to children of all ages and to grandparents too; it applies to Anglos and African-Americans and Latinos and Asians. Jesus said “it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer and die,” and God the Father on the mountain said to his disciples “*Listen to him.*”

The truth is that we are no more capable of delivering ourselves, without God’s intervention, from the bonds of sin and sickness and suffering, from folly and greed and over-indulgence and addiction, than the Israelites were able to escape from Egypt. So the New Exodus that Jesus offers those who will trust him and get up and follow him – even at night, through the deep waters, across the desert – is a deliverance for which the escape from Egypt was just a prototype. That was the founding event of the nation called Israel; Jesus’ Exodus was the founding event of the new kingdom of God, expressed now in the form we call “the Church of Jesus Christ.”

The Son of Man *must* suffer and die, and we *must* listen to him. When he says “come to me,” we have to come. When he says “repent and believe the Gospel,” we have a clear choice to make. When he says “I have come to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many,” we can only say “thank you Lord.” When he says “follow me,” we can only say “which way, Lord?”

“This is my Son. Listen to him.” Not to his critics, not to the skeptics, not to the self-indulgent and self-important people the Bible calls “fools.” Listen to *him!*

Let us pray...