**Luke 9:26-38** March 3, 2019

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*Luke 9:28About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. 29As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. 30Two men, Moses and Elijah, 31appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. 32Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. 33As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)*

*34While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” 36When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Don’t Forget Who Jesus Is!**

As we approach the house, two men in a parked car stop us. They ask for our identification and then let us proceed. Otherwise this place looks like a very ordinary house out in the country. Very ordinary, except it is even less than ordinary. The home is a one-bedroom house. Outside is parked a blue Volkswagen Beetle, late 80’s. Even the dog is a little under-impressive: it only has three legs. As we are about to knock on the door, if I were to tell you that the man about to answer the door is the president of the nation, you would laugh, “Yah right. Seriously, who is he?” He is President Jose Mujica, president of the nation of Uruguay from 2010 to 2015. He refused to live a single day in the presidential mansion. When he had to fly for government business, he flew economy class like most people. When he went to work, he drove his own 1987 Beetle without a motorcade. Given our expectations and experience of people with power, we would find it hard to believe and easier to forget that this man is a president. [[1]](#footnote-1)

But enough about Jose Mujica, let’s talk about Jesus. Jesus was, well, far more powerful and even more humble. Which is kind of what the Gospel of Luke was getting at with the opening words of our reading, ***“About eight days after Jesus said this…”***. Said what?

One of the problems of the way we do our Sunday Scripture readings is that we take these short readings of a few sentences out of the much larger story of Jesus’ life. I suppose it’s just the way it has to be. After all, you don’t want me to read the entire Gospel of Luke every Sunday. People get fidgety enough if our church service, with communion, takes more than an hour and ten minutes. So we end up taking our readings out of context. When a story begins, ***“About eight days after [he] said this…”*** the first thing you should think is, “After he said what?” But we have gotten so used to this in our Scripture readings that when we hear “after he said this” we don’t even get our curiosity up wondering what it was he said! But today, we just have to. Today we have to go back to the context.

What had Jesus talked about about a week before his face shone like the sun and his clothes like lightning? What had Jesus talked about before the voice of God thundered, ***“This is my Son”***? What had Jesus talked about before two of God’s greatest Old Testament messengers appeared on the mountaintop conversing with Jesus?

A few days before this Jesus had been telling his disciples that he would be rejected, arrested, tortured and executed. He followed that up by looking them in the eye and saying, *“If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it.”* (Abbrev.) For the last week the disciples had been digesting that unpleasant bit of news.

The opening words of our sermon text, ***“About eight days after Jesus said this…”*** tie that message of humiliation with today’s message of glory. It is the great paradox, the great contradiction and puzzle of the Christian faith that our glorious Savior came and lived in such humility. It is a paradox that at Jesus’ death the only belongings he had were the clothes on his back—and then before he died even those were ripped away from him—that the one time in his life that he got onto the first century equivalent of a 1987 VW Beetle, a mule, he had to use a borrowed mule—it is the great and unbelievable paradox that this poor, humble man is the Son of God. The Gospel of Luke puts these events next to each other so that his disciples, and we, do not forget who Jesus is. Even in Lent when we see the worst possible things happen to Jesus, we are to remember who he is!

So a week after Jesus broke the discouraging news to his disciples that his ministry would take a tragic turn, he took three of his disciples up a mountain. There, while Jesus did what he did: prayed, his disciples did what they did: they fell asleep.

Imagine a person from the 1800’s transported into our time. Imagine that the first thing you do is take that visitor to the latest Avengers movie. This guy has never seen even a light bulb! And he hasn’t heard a phonograph or even seen a picture. Then you take him to a movie with high definition computer generated imagery on a fifty foot movie screen with surround sound deeper than thunder! Imagine the awe.

In Jesus’ day they didn’t even have candles as we know them. Their tallow candles and olive oil lamps were far dimmer than even our candles. Other than the sun, these disciples had never seen a light brighter than a backyard fire. They had not seen movies or even paintings as we think of them! To people who had not been desensitized by technology, how awesome Jesus’ change of appearance must have been! Clothes like lightning, a face showing the glory of God! It was an amazing moment burned into their memory. A week after Jesus’ pessimism about being rejected and killed, they are thinking, “This is the Jesus we want!”

But the bright lights are only the beginning! Once the disciples finally shake the sleep out of their eyes, their minds begin to process what is going on, ***“Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with [Jesus].”*** By the way, this seems to tell us something about heaven, that Moses and Elijah needed no introduction. The disciples knew who they were.

Anyway, why Moses and Elijah? The disciples knew. They may have been dim-witted when it came to Jesus, but when it came to the Old Testament, they knew. They knew why Moses and Elijah were there!

Moses was, of course, the great law-giver and Israel’s first leader. More than that, Moses wrote down the first five books of the Bible, and thus God’s first promises of a Savior. In Moses’ last moments of life, as he spoke parting words of wisdom to the Israelites, he told them, *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”* Moses had pointed God’s people to a coming Savior. Now Moses has been summoned before Jesus.

And Elijah. Why Elijah? When you get to the last book of the Old Testament, in the last chapter, in the last two verses of that chapter, God ends the Old Testament saying that he will send the prophet Elijah before the day of the Lord. And so the Jews, and this is well-documented, the Jews expected that just before the Messiah came, they would first see Elijah. Now whether this would be the original Elijah come back from heaven or a metaphorical Elijah, that was up for debate. But the point is that when the disciples saw Elijah, they remembered, they knew, they thought, “Just like the Scriptures say! Elijah! Jesus *must* be the Messiah!”

Suddenly a mysterious, bright ***“cloud appeared and enveloped them.”*** Again, the disciples would have recognized this cloud better than we. It is that Glory of the Lord, that glorious cloud signifying the Lord’s presence which had led the Israelites in the desert, which had entered the tabernacle in the desert and the temple of Solomon when they were dedicated. Appropriately enough, the disciples ***“were afraid as they entered the cloud.”***

Finally, a voice thundered from the cloud, ***“This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”*** If there was any doubt left in the disciples, it sizzled away like a drop of water on a hot griddle. ***“Listen to him!”*** What a rebuke! What a rebuke to disciples who had doubted Jesus, one of whom had even had the audacity to lecture Jesus!

Oh, how those words need to be repeated, again and again. ***“Listen to him!”*** We forget who Jesus is. We forget that he is the true all-glorious, all-knowing, all-powerful God. We walk out of church and perhaps can’t even get home before we start our gossip. We get home and are kind of glad that church is finally over—“And can you believe that the service took an hour and twenty minutes!” Later in the day the television or device gets turned on to content that really isn’t fitting for God’s people. Watching the news we rail against this or that public figure even though God’s Word says, *“I urge that… prayers be made… for all those in authority.”* Time and again we run contrary to what we know our almighty God wants, but because God doesn’t burst into our lives like he did on those three disciples on that mountaintop, we imagine that God doesn’t see, or at least that it doesn’t matter. If God’s reality on that mount of transfiguration were in our life all the time, how differently we would ask. But because God has given us freedom, we abuse that freedom.

We cover up sin from other people if we think they might find out. We have enough sense to hide from them. But God sees it all, and we just don’t care! If our faith were a perfect faith, we would feel like Peter, John and James up there on that mountain. We would not even consider sin.

Oh, but maybe if God would give us an experience like those disciples had, maybe we would behave so much better, right? I don’t think so. Why don’t I think so? Because those disciples prove that our human nature is beyond cure, the human heart deceitful beyond all measure. God gave them a glorious mountaintop experience with a glowing Jesus and resurrected prophets and shining clouds and thundering voices. Then in a few short weeks after following Jesus to Jerusalem, they deserted him in a moment of fear. One of the three on this mountaintop denied him! After Jesus’ death, all hid in a house and bolted the doors. None hoped for Jesus to rise, even though he had said he would. They misunderstood what this moment of glory had been about. They thought this moment of glory meant that the rest of their days on this earth would be glorious. But that is not why Jesus’ glory shown forth on that mountaintop. It had been given so that in the darkest, most hopeless moments, they would remember just who Jesus is. That his “defeat” was not defeat, but part of a plan. But they failed. They failed to remember, and they failed to act like Jesus really was Lord of their lives.

Which brings us to Jesus’ greatest glory of all. Of all the things I have mentioned: the shining, the prophets, the cloud, the voice, I have not mentioned Jesus’ greatest glory on this mountain.

Subjectively, in regard to us, Jesus’ greatest glory is mentioned ever so briefly in our reading: ***“Moses and Elijah appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure.”*** Moses and Elijah had been summoned from heaven to have a talk with Jesus. And what did they talk about? It wasn’t about politics or morals or the breaking up of society. They had been summoned from heaven to speak with Jesus about his coming sufferings, death. This is the true glory of Jesus, the reason he came to earth. If were not for this last day of his mission on earth, all the rest of his glory could only make us cower in fear. Without Jesus’ sacrifice for sin, God’s glory can only condemn us. He is holy. We are sinful. Jesus wore this mountaintop glory for a few fleeting seconds, and its brevity proves why he came. It is for us. His greatest glory is sung in a hymn that we will sing this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. That hymn ends: “Jesus, crucified for me, is my life, my hope's foundation, *and my glory* and salvation” (CW 320). Jesus greatest glory has also become my glory.

Look at all that Jesus has done for you. Don’t forget who he is who has done this for you. Amen.

1. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/13/uruguay-president-jose-mujica [↑](#footnote-ref-1)