

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

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A Glimpse of Future Glory

Luke 9:28-36

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When I was a student at White Rock Elementary School in Dallas, I enjoyed going to the school's library with my class. I always gravitated to books about sports and history. I especially loved the history books that had the red banner across the front cover that proclaimed its promise: "You were there." The promise was that I wouldn't simply read about the experience that others had, but that I would in some way experience it too.

We really should put that banner on the front of our Bibles, too. You see, I'm up there on the mountain because I'm the reader of the text.

One of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, talks about how the Bible does that to the reader. When you read the Bible, you are immediately present in the story. Craddock even makes the confession: "I resent the Bible just rushing me in when all I intended to do was read a few verses of Bible."

But read the story of the Transfiguration, and you're there on the mountain. You don't get a summary statement: "And the disciples had an unusual experience with the dazzling Jesus when they were on the mountain." No, no, no. You're up there. You hear them talk. And the Bible does that to us all the time.

Do you remember going up on the mountain with Abraham and his son Isaac. You don't get a summary statement: "Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, but God made a substitute ram at the last moment." No, you're up there. You watch Abraham and Isaac gather the sticks, you're there when Abraham ties up his son, you can even hear the father and son talk, "Daddy, we don't have an animal for the sacrifice." You're up there; you see the glint of the morning sun on the blade of the knife.

It happens all the time. You read the Bible, and you're in the garden of Gethsemane with Jesus. Nobody else is there, but when you read the story, you are.

We're at the cross. Everybody else has abandoned and fled. There are some women at a distance from Galilee, but you and I, just because we're readers, we're there. We hear everything that happened at the cross.

It's a frightening thing to read the Bible. I sometimes just want to say, "I didn't sign up for this! Get me out of here!"

Do you feel that way when you hear this story of the Transfiguration on the mountain? I can't help but imagine that Peter, James, and John had to be thinking that, "How come we didn't get to stay with the other disciples?"

This story, though, is well placed in the Christian year. It's our last Gospel reading before Lent. The days following Epiphany, beginning January 6, come to a close. The time between Epiphany and Transfiguration is when the church declares publicly to the world who Jesus really is. And this reading from Luke is one of the three anchor texts for that proclamation. The whisper of Bethlehem has now become the shout of Jerusalem. The coming of the magi indicates that the nations are coming to worship Christ. The baptism of Jesus, "This is my Son, my beloved in whom I delight," said the voice from heaven. And now the transfiguration, "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him!"

This text is also well placed in Luke's Gospel as well, as all the Epiphany texts are. Just when a wicked tyrant begins to threaten the infant Jesus, the world came to worship him with gifts.

Or a bit later, just as Jesus is joining the others who come to the Jordan to be baptized, seemingly no different from all of those confessing their sins and being baptized for forgiveness, still wet from his baptism, the voice from heaven says, "This is who he really is."

And now just eight days following Jesus' first statement to his disciples about his approaching death, the voice from heaven says, "But this is who he really is." And the curtain lifts, and the dazzling splendor of the transfiguration spreads before their eyes.

But for all the timeliness of this text, it comes too soon for Peter, James, and John. They're not ready. They're afraid, they're full of thoughtless chatter, they make senseless statements; they're awkward.

There are some commentators who criticize them a bit for not being prepared for this. After all, their own Hebrew Scriptures tell stories in the Book of Exodus about times very similar to this one: Moses going up into the mountain, the cloud, the voice, the shining face, the revelation, the making of a tent—why weren't they ready?

Not only did they have continuity with their scriptures—they should have been ready, some say, because of their own experiences with Jesus. "Look what they've already experienced with Jesus," the voices cry. "Exorcisms, healings, walking on water, feeding multitudes, even the raising of a 12-year-old girl from the dead. Why weren't they ready?"

Well, they're not. They're not ready. They are terrified, absolutely terrified. I'm sure if they had known what awaited them on the mountain, they would have done what Israel did. "Moses, we'll wait here. You go on up and when you come back, tell us what you heard and what you saw. We'll listen. We'll be interested in what you have to tell us."

No, they get dragged up the mountain with Jesus, and because we read the story, we are there too. They simply didn't know what to say. Into that awkward silence comes the voice from heaven with familiar words: "This is my Son, my Chosen."

The cloud obscures their vision, they only hear the voice, and then, upon looking around, see only Jesus. And so, with nothing else to see or do, they listen. They emerge from the fog on the mountain and within their minds, still trying to make sense of the words "Jesus" and "dead" in the same breath, and they walk back down the mountain to step back onto Luke's more familiar path—the path to the Cross, the path to suffering and death. And they will cling to this vision of the glory of God in Jesus Christ for all its worth, for soon this glory will be hard to see in the One dying on the cross.

In a way, that's what this story offers us—a glimpse into the future. And not just a glimpse of any future, but a vision of the ultimate future, God's promised future. And this glimpse of the future creates for all of God's disciples the most remarkable responsibility we can be given.

This story reaffirms the truth celebrated at Jesus' baptism—"This is my Son." It was an amazing moment. It was as if Peter, James, and John were standing on the edge of a new world where all would see what they were seeing—the glory of the Lord.

It's no wonder that Peter didn't want the moment to end. He's been given a lot of grief for suggesting he build dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. It was as if all would be well if they stayed. This was a reference to the annual Festival of Booths which looked back to the days when God lived with the people in tents and forward to the promised day when God would dwell again with the people.

Some scholars have suggested that it was this understanding that prompted Peter's suggestion. In this experience, he thought the future had come. "Let's build the booths."

But though the future had not come, it had been seen. The transfiguration occurs in the middle of Jesus' ministry. They are still on a journey to the Cross; there are still villages to go through, diseases to heal, good news to speak, and disputes to be settled. The future had been seen, and now it shaped the present with urgent responsibility.

And that's where the church is today. We are those who have come to see the promises of God's future in Jesus Christ, and so we work now and live the future in the present. We work for justice. We strive for peace. We outdo one another in showing love. We forgive. We hope. There is a tremendous responsibility for us to live into the future we have seen in Jesus Christ.

And that's why we can't just come down the mountain and say, "Guess what we saw today." No, we can't do that. It will take time. Which is why the call to listen to Jesus rings in our ears.

We do that now by joining together to pray and to read and to listen—all so that we may hear Jesus' invitation to extend the love of God and neighbor in the world. And there's no better time than the season of Lent—which begins this Wednesday—to renew our commitment to listening to the One we seek to follow.