

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/FEBRUARY 14, 2010

## INTO THE HOLY/LUKE 9:28-36

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### I. THE TEXT

Today marks the end of the liturgical season of Epiphany, a season that begins and ends with the voice of God. The scripture that traditionally opens Epiphany is the story of Jesus' baptism; the one that closes it is the story of the Transfiguration – in each God says in a rather straightforward manner, “This is my Son.” Yet the story we visit each year on this particular Sunday is a bit more mysterious – a story of mythic proportions. Almost all of us are familiar with baptisms, but I suspect not that many of us have seen with our own eyes the unmediated holiness, the ineffable glory of God. Let us consider the day Jesus took three friends up a mountain for a prayer meeting. Hear the word of God from Luke's gospel...

*<sup>28</sup>Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup>And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup>Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup>They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>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. <sup>34</sup>While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup>Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” <sup>36</sup>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.*

**II. PRAYER:** God of glory, open to us these ancient words of scripture that they may find their way to this day... to us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

### III. THE MOUNTAIN AND ITS MEANING

It happened on a mountain. A mystery story... an encounter with the mystical, the transcendent, the likes of which few ever experience. Jesus, Peter, John and James climb a mountain to pray. No ordinary prayer meeting. Luke tells us that Peter, James and John fall asleep... (falling asleep during a prayer meeting, well, maybe that part's normal). When they woke up, they'd entered a first century twilight zone... a scene so outlandish... the gospel writers grope for words to describe the indescribable... a transfiguration they called it. The word they use is metamorphosis – change. Jesus, they say, morphed, was changed before their very eyes. One moment he looked like the normal old Jesus they'd been hanging out with... and the next... his face shone like the sun... he was radiant... his garments glistened white as light... whiter than any bleach could bleach. Not only that, Moses and Elijah arrive... no easy feat for two prophets who'd been dead for centuries. And then, God shows up... in the cloud. Jews knew about clouds, they'd gotten acquainted with a cloud long ago in the wilderness – they knew it meant the presence of God. God's voice speaks from the cloud – “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” No, not your ordinary prayer meeting.

## A. MEANING FOR JESUS

I assure you we will not be able to untangle the complexities of this text this morning – a text that calls not for scientific examination but heartfelt immersion and an openness to mystery... a task difficult for most of us steeped in post-Enlightenment rationality. Texts such as this are not so much exercises in empirical fact-finding as they are soulful provocateurs. Let me reflect on a few of the questions the story provokes in me.

**First, I wonder about the significance of this mountain-top experience for Jesus.** Why did he drag Peter, James and John up the hill in the first place? To dazzle his disciples? If so, it was wasted energy – they dozed off for a good part of it. No, it seems Jesus had an intense need to talk something over with God – there was a matter on his mind and heart so large that his normal practices of prayer just wouldn't do. There are some clues to what that was a bit earlier in the story. This mountain-top retreat takes place right on the heels of Jesus' announcement to his disciples that rather than a throne and palace, his future held suffering and a cross ... he was heading to Jerusalem to die. The disciples didn't take it well. I imagine Jesus was not keen on the idea either. Later, Jesus would drag Peter, James and John into a garden – they would fall asleep **there** too. In the garden, in prayer Jesus would beg — “Please Father, can't we find some other way to do this?”

Perhaps that was the agenda of this trip up the hill as well. Could it be that Jesus, fully human Jesus, was frightened? Perhaps even reluctant to carry out the divine plan? Perhaps Jesus was seeking clarity, perhaps he needed to know now – as he would need to know later in dark Gethsemane, that Good Friday was indeed the only way – that his suffering and death were necessary.

There were no two figures in the Jewish world larger than Moses, representing the law, and Elijah, representing the prophets. There on the mountain, Elijah and Moses and Jesus the seeker, the one who would fulfill their mission, enter a conversation about Jerusalem, and Jesus' fate. And then God shows up. No wonder Jesus begins to glow. From the clouds God affirms once more – “this is my Son, the one I've chosen.” God has spoken these words twice now, at the onset of momentous turns in Jesus' life. Perhaps for Jesus, this mountaintop summit provided strength for the difficult journey ahead; reassurance that the ways of God were best; that what he'd been called to do, he could do.

## B. MEANING FOR PETER, JAMES AND JOHN

I also wonder what this mysterious mountain summit meant for Peter, James and John. They were simply observers, bystanders – taken along, it seems, for moral support. And there, they are privileged to participate in one of the most profound moments in the Christian story. Now, there had been other times that God had shown up in this mystical sort of way – there was Moses and the burning bush, Jacob and the ladder full of angels, Job and the voice out of the whirlwind – but none quite so fantastic as this one. Imagine, the disciples doze off as Jesus is praying and awaken to him shining like the sun. Frederick Buechner describes it, Jesus' “holiness shining through his humanness.” Peter, emerging from his nap, blurts out, “This is terrific! Let's stay! We'll build some tents and stay a while. One for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. What could be better?” Peter knows he's on to a good thing and, understandably, wants to make it permanent. The mountain's a great place, you can't beat the famous company? And who can blame him – the day to day of real life can be tough. Who wants mundane when you can have glories of the mountaintop?

Before Peter can even finish his thoughts a cloud moves in and hovers over the 6 of them – but not just any cloud – a cloud that signifies that God is there. The divine voice speaks directly to Peter, James and John – “This is my Son, the one I’ve Chosen; listen to him!” You see, the disciples hadn’t been listening to Jesus. Remember, they’d heard him say just a few days earlier that he was headed to Jerusalem to die, that his future and theirs held a cross. But **they’d** been counting on Jesus to march into Jerusalem and take over. They’d hear none of this nonsense about betrayal and suffering, death and dashed hopes. They had a better idea: Jesus’ army would ride in and take charge, and soon they’d be wielding a little power of their own. But from the cloud they get divine instruction – “Peter... James... John... it’s not about your plans – **listen to Jesus** – he knows the way.”

They will not get the profundity of this moment until much later in their lives. I suppose we could call them slow learners. Even after this extraordinary experience, James and John will still argue over which of them will be greatest in the land of which Jesus will be king. Peter will still betray Jesus three times in a courtyard. They will still argue with Jesus about his death until his arrest in the garden. But perhaps we would have been slow learners, too. After all, we’ve had this story – in fact we’ve had the whole story – for some 2,000 years, and we’re still struggling with giving our lives to its grace and its challenge.

### C. MEANING FOR US

So we must ask, of course, what is this story’s meaning for you and for me? Perhaps it is found in the myriad questions it raises, among them...

**1. If Jesus needed to sort things through with God why do we try to manage life without time spent in prayer?** Where do we go for the important work of sorting out our purpose and calling if it is not to the one who created us and knows best the direction we ought to be going? We live in a world that preaches the value of self-reliance and self-sufficiency – that values independence, and that ridiculous myth of the self-made person. But, apparently, not even Jesus could go it alone. His days were laced with prayer – from the times he went away for extended periods to the muttered prayers of his day-to-day, Jesus held on to the holy through the language of prayer. Why is it that we will spend hours balancing our checkbook and give no time to balancing our lives? Prayer can lift us to the mountaintop or carry us through the valleys; it is how we open ourselves to the holy, to the necessary presence of God. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

**2. A related question – if Jesus needed companions in the darkest nights of his soul, why do we so often feel we must go it alone?** Jesus needed Peter, James and John to go with him to the mountain and later to the garden – difficult moments in which he hoped to get by with a little help from his friends. The first thing Jesus did after his baptism was surround himself with companions, and remained surrounded by them – apparently unembarrassed to ask for help, for prayer. The very personal act of prayer and the interpersonal act of doing life with others are intertwined throughout Jesus ministry.

Our go-it-alone culture can make us reluctant to appear as if we need companions, helpers. Jesus apparently... obviously – had no such problem.

**3. Last and most important question – to whom do we listen?** God spoke to them and speaks to us still from the cloud, “listen to him.” It’s not so simple for us. Jesus’ voice can – as we see time and time again in his disciple’s reactions – and in our own – be very troubling. That is why we try so hard to tame him – whether we demand, from the right, that every word

be taken at face value or from the left, that these words couldn't possibly be true. Indeed, there are many more voices that sound more reasonable than his... and far more appealing! Jesus and his friends are barely off the hill when he again begins to talk about his death – not exactly what they wanted to hear after their glorious outing. **And yet he tells us that his way is the way to life.** Author Madeleine l'Engle asks:

“Why are we so gullible when it comes to promises about floor waxes which are better than other floor waxes, or pain killers which will remove all our physical ills, or all the other false promises which are constantly being offered a credulous public, and yet are afraid of the myths which will give meaning to our lives?”

She goes on to answer her own question – “If Jesus was a threat to Herod two thousand years ago, He is still a threat today because He demands that we see ourselves as we really are, that we drop our self-protective devices, that we become willing to live the abundant life He calls us to live.”<sup>i</sup>

Of course, Jesus' idea of the abundant life is not the one offered – at a discount – on T.V. It is life discovered in loving God and neighbor; loving even our enemies. Life discovered in giving; in choosing what an old liturgy referred to as “the hard right against the easy wrong;” in serving; in pausing in gratitude for the food on our tables and the people with whom we share it. Life discovered in, as the creator of the universe so simply put it, “Listening to Him... to my son” – whose alternative ways are the only path to the life for which you hope.

We are faced in every moment with opportunity, with choices. It does indeed matter to whom we listen.

We step this week out of Epiphany and into the season of Lent. May it be for us a season of pondering and praying and wondering – of being honest, as Jesus was, about our needs and our fears. A season of prayer. A season of making space and time in our lives for God's son, God's chosen, and alone or with others, on the mountaintop or in our living rooms – pausing however long or however briefly to, simply, deeply, as God asks, “listen to him.” **AMEN AND AMEN.**

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<sup>i</sup> Madeleine l'Engle, “The Mythical Bible”