

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Luke 9:28-36

I started training to become a Lay Speaker in the Methodist Church in 2010. Gave my first sermon to a real congregation in Dec 2010. In the 11 years that have passed since then, I have gone out of my way to avoid preaching on three topics - The Trinity (because... well, the Trinity) The entire book of Revelation (okay, maybe I could handle the first three chapters) and the Transfiguration (because... are you kidding me? I don't even understand what happened!) Now, I never actually told Christine this... but when she called me in early January to see if I'd be interested in preaching at the end of February, all I was thinking was "Well, the bulk of my tax work and year end closings will be done. Why not?" But she knew what she was getting me into!

In the past, when I've read this passage without the terror of having to preach it, I've always been drawn to Peter. So impetuous. So unwitting. So... like me. Since I became a Christ follower, I've always identified most with Simon Peter. Jump in with your whole self. Make a kazillion vows I'll never be able to keep up with. Open mouth, insert foot.

And I had every intention of preaching on Peter: on his impetuosity, and how this is just another episode of Peter getting it all wrong, how our faith journey isn't all about the mountaintop experiences, but that we have to go back down into the "real world" and get to work being the hands and feet of Christ. But then I stumbled on a blog written by a rogue UMC pastor named Jason Micheli, whom I admire very much. In his blog, he pointed out two things that I have always missed about this passage. So, on Thursday, I scrapped everything I'd prepared up to that point and started over.

So. Here we are on Transfiguration Sunday. In which we observe one of the five most pivotal milestones in Jesus's time on earth – the Transfiguration is the bridge from His **Baptism** which leads to His **Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension**. It is the point in which Jesus's divinity is confirmed by God, the Law (represented by Moses) and the Prophets (represented by Elijah). From this point forward, Jesus will move inexorably towards Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. While this episode is mentioned in all three synoptic Gospels – and alluded to in the opening chapter of John's - Luke spells it out for us: Moses and Elijah were there to discuss Christ's coming departure – literally His "exodus."

The disciples witness the very veil of Jesus's humanity being pulled away, and very briefly get to see Him in all his divine glory. And, yes, Peter immediately starts chattering about building three "dwellings" for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Was he thinking about the booths that the Jewish people built for the Festival of the Booths every fall? Or maybe he was thinking of the tabernacle that the Israelites carried with them in the dessert during their 40 years of wandering. Or, perhaps he simply wanted to stretch out this time and avoid what waited down there in the "real world".

Each of the synoptic gospels follows the exact same timeline here: 1st we have Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, followed by Jesus predicting that he would be rejected by the elders, killed and in 3 days would rise from the dead. This was very confusing and frightening to the disciples – who were still expecting Messiah to oust Rome and restore Israel to her former glory.

So, why not try to postpone that for as long as possible? Who knows? Maybe in time Moses and Elijah would see the value of Jesus *not* going to Jerusalem, and might talk him out of it..... The gospels don't tell us any of this. We just have Peter babbling in his Peterish way, until a cloud overcomes them and a voice – presumably God's - announces "This is My son, My chosen one. Listen to him!" That shuts Peter up quickly! In fact, Luke tells us the inner circle of disciples were all left speechless. And just as suddenly as they appeared, Moses and Elijah were gone, and Jesus is just Jesus again, and down the mountain they go.

So what did my rogue pastor point out in his blog, that made me rethink my sermon?

First – that this is the only time one of Christ's disciples say something to him – in this case Peter suggesting that "It is good to be here, let's build some tents!" – and Christ does not respond. With Peter especially, the Lord is constantly correcting or admonishing him. In Mark's gospel we get the infamous "Get behind me, Satan!" retort immediately before this passage. And yet, here, Jesus does not rebuke Peter. Why is that?

If the point of the transfiguration is that we can't stay on the mountain, Jason writes, *Why doesn't Jesus rebuff Peter and say: 'No, it is good for us to go back down the mountain to serve the least, the lost, and the lonely?'* he goes on to say *What would Peter make of the fact that so many preachers make Peter the subject of the sermon? Peter would know that he should not be the subject of our sermons. Peter would know that the takeaway from the Transfiguration is not what **we** must go down and do for God. The takeaway from the transfiguration is what **God** is about to go down and do for us. For ALL of us. Once for ALL. The Transfiguration— it is a preview of the Gospel.*

Moses and Elijah, the giver of the Law and the prophet of the Law, are there on this mountaintop "speaking with Jesus about his departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem."

Accomplish.

Luke doesn't say Jesus was about to experience something unfortunate or unintended in Jerusalem. He says accomplish.

The 2nd thing this pastor pointed out was that Peter, James & John witnessed the divine glory of Jesus – *and lived to tell the tale*. I know that in Matthew and Mark, Jesus tells the disciples to keep quiet about what they saw – but I think they would have been lost in thought simply because they were still alive after what they'd just seen. It went against every lesson they'd ever been taught about the glory of God in the Hebrew scriptures.

And yet, this pastor writes, Peter and James and John— sinners all, Peter maybe most of all— beheld the unmediated glory of God in the flesh and they did not receive the wage their sins had earned them. They were not struck dead. That's why they walk away dead silent. They were dumbfounded by this preview of the grace of God where another's death will do for undeserving sinners.

We have all sinned and fallen short. But Christ is the end of the Law. God judges not a one of us according to us. God judges every one of us on account of Christ's cross and according to his righteousness. Such that, now, by grace alone— not by what you do or who you are— by grace alone— now, like those three disciples on the mountaintop today, you and I (though sinners we are and sinners we always will remain) We can sleep easy before the glory of God.

That the disciples live to go back down the mountain is a preview of the glad tidings that we are justified not by our behavior, not by our belief, not by our good-deed-doing but by grace alone.

That's the Gospel.

So, he concludes that the reason Christ doesn't correct Peter is because Peter is right.

It is good for us to be here. It is good for us to see that the Law, according to which not one of us measures up, ends in the glory of his grace; so that, the Law is fulfilled in us not through our pious deeds or holy living but through faith alone.

Now, I will continue to preach that the transforming power of the Holy Spirit should be preparing your hearts and powering your bodies to get out there and serve the least and the lost. But not because it's a requirement for salvation. Only because you will want to share with others the blessings you have been given. I know in my case, I am compelled.

But for now, let us rest on that mountain. Let us witness the glory of God, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians *"with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, ...being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another;"*

Because of Christ, we can lay our burdens down, put the Law over there, and rest in Grace.

That's not just good news. That's **the** Good News.

Amen.