**Luke 9, Part D**

**[note: this is much longer than what I will preach in person]**

Last week on Sunday afternoon, Kelly took me aside and asked me, “What that sermon about…” and named someone we know from somewhere else. I told her honestly that the person she mentioned had never crossed her mind. But she pointed out, when I said this, it seemed just like this person, and when she said that, it seemed like someone else. Later in the week, someone asked me… in your sermon… were you referring to that conversation we had last week. But again, the answer was “no.” I wasn’t thinking of anyone in particular. But I think the reason it might have seemed like that is that the topic is one that describes many of our lives.

We talked about how Jesus told the disciples for the first time that he would have to suffer and die. Similarly he calls his disciples to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, which is an instrument of death and putting to death our sinful nature, and to follow him. But we live in a culture that says, Indulge yourself, take up your entertainment, follow noone unless you want to. So it is easy to think of examples in our lives where this conflicts with the way we live.

But to be honest, instead of saying, “American culture” I could simply say, “the world.” It’s not as though ancient Jewish culture or modern Chinese culture, or any culture, is more in line with the message of Jesus. And I’m sure it was the same way for the disciples. They were following Jesus because they believed he was the Messiah, true. But they thought that meant he was going to be a great king. And since they were his right-hand men, they were going to get a nice place in the kingdom. They would have authority, prestige and all the other things that go along with serving a great king. And so when he said, “You must deny yourselves, take up your cross daily, and follow me,” they must have been confused. When he said that as the Messiah he was going to be handed over and killed, we know they did not understand. It was going right over their heads.

Today’s reading is really about how that message that Jesus is the Messiah, that the Messiah must die and rise, and his disciples must suffer with him, was able to sink in. And the three disciples he wanted it to sink home the most with were Peter, James, and John, who seem to have been leaders among the disciples:

**About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.**

Though it does not say the name of the mountain, it seems likely that it was this mountain, Mout Hermon (see slide). We know from Matthew and Mark that he was in this area when it happened.

**As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus.**

This was the only time that the disciples saw him like this. Even after his resurrection Jesus seems to have looked normal. Aside from the book of Revelation, this is the most glorious description of Jesus. He was shining with bright, white light, representing holiness, purity, and power. If his face was as bright as lightning, it must have been hard to look on. And he appeared with two men:

“Why these two? They may signify the Law and the Prophets respectively, and so confirm Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Both men also received mountaintop revelations of God (see comments on 9:28) and were known for their powerful miracles. Jesus’ miracles often recall their works (e.g., Moses recalled in the feeding of the five thousand; Elijah recalled in the raising of the widow’s son). Both men’s lives also ended unusually. Elijah did not die, but was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2). Moses died alone on Mount Nebo and was buried by God himself (Deut. 34:6).”

**They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.**

I think perhaps part of the reason this happened is that Jesus wanted to talk to someone about his impending departure. But no one else on earth understood, and so God raised up the great prophets so that Jesus could have a brief conversation with them and receive some encouragement. Yet at the same time, it must have been for his disciples. They needed to see, so clearly that Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament, and that meant he had to have a departure in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the disciples were just confused:

**Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As 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.)**

I don’t think we should seek to find a deep meaning in what Peter says. Ultimately, he didn’t really know what he was saying. I guess he was hoping they could stay up there and enjoy the moment for a while. But they didn’t need to stay up there. What they needed was to learn a lesson about Jesus:

**While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”**

This cloud reminds of the exodus from Egypt when God appeared in a cloud. This cloud represented god’s holiness. And here is was. God himself came down from heaven and pronounced on them: This is my son, whom I have chosen, listen to him. We cannot even begin to fathom what this would be like. What a transcendant, glorious moment. Perhaps you’ve been on some cool rides or seen some cool special effects in the movies. This would make all those seem insignificant. Perhaps you have felt God’s presence at times of distress or joy. This would make all of those times seem small. They were unwillingly called up into a cloud of God’s glory and heard God himself speak a message to them: Listen to my son!!!

What amazing power Jesus had. No wonder they were afraid. In our experience, power is often misused. People use their power selfishly. Those who are strong tend to look down on those who are weak. At the same time, we know all too well that we are not holy. We are filled with sin, God is filled with righteouesness and goodness, but likewise, he detests with a righteous repulsion we can only faintly sense. The powerful, holy presence of God would seem to spell certain doom for sinful people like the disciples, or like us, for what could God do but judge us and destroy us? But that is not what we find:

**When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone.**

In an instant, it was over. The cloud was gone, the glowing stopped, and Moses and Elijah had vanished. And there was Jesus. Now, was his glory gone? This is a really key point. His glory is still there. That glory the disciples saw, it’s not like Jesus was any less powerful or any less holy than a moment before. he could still be glowing if he wanted to. But that is not how he chose to come into this world. He did not come as a judge, but as a Savior. He did not come to give us what we deserve, but to take the punishment we deserve on himself. He does not want to drive us away or terrify us with his holiness, but to made himself approachable, and instead of demanding holiness from us, he gives us his own holiness to be our own.

**The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.**

This might surprise us, but I think it’s similar to the way some veterans don’t want to talk about things they’ve experience in war. It’s too overwhelming. It’s too hard to put into words. You don’t think the other people can relate to you. Telling the story brings back the experience. And I think it probably was a little bit terrifying for them, walking around with this person they had just seen glowing. But this glimpse into the inner workings of heaven would sustain them in the trials and difficulties to come, as they watched their dear teaher publicaly executed, and wondered how he could possibly be the Christ. But Peter James and John could never forget or doubt that he was the Son of God after this experience.

None of us has seen Jesus in his glory. Sometimes we experience his glory more than other times, but it is always there. I think when we first come to faith, or for some of you, when you re-discover your faith, there is something of a “high”. You feel really close to Jesus, you feel very confident in your faith. Treasure these days. Because just as we saw in the parable of the sower a few weeks ago, times of testing will come. Times when you may not feel Jesus’ presence in the same way. Times when your faith will be challenged much more as you are surrounded by difficulty. Times when, like Peter or John, our fear and our weakness might get the better of us and we are not the disciples we should be. But cling to this knowledge, that Jesus truly is the brilliant, glorious Son of God, come down into this world, and he is yours. He has saved you and redeemed you. He has chosen to hide his glory for the time being. We don’t always see it. But he has promised he is seated on high ruling all things for his people, and he has promised that one day he will come back and take us to be with him in his glory. But it will not terrify us, no, our lives will be transformed into glory along with him.

This day is often called “transfiguration” which means, “changed appearance.” It is only his appearance that changed. He did not briefly change his character, no, for a brief moment he unveiled to us who he truly is. And so let’s do what the Father said: Listen to him!

**Part E**

When they get back down to the bottom of the mountain, it might seem like “business as usual.” Jesus is back to healing people. But as I read the account, see if you can notice some things that are new and indicate Jesus has entered a new stage of ministry:

**The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.” “O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.” Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.**

Yet do you notice a few things off here? First, the disciples were not able to heal him. This is a surprise. They had been driving out demons in his name when they were on their mission trip we read about last time. But now their power is limited. It indicates that they have more growing to do. And did you notice Jesus’ response to the man? “I unbelieving and perverse generation!” “How long shall I stay with you and put up with you?” Jesus was *annoyed*. Yet Jesus was without sin. He never says something just to vent or to indulge his ego. Why say this now? Because three of his disciples were just on the mountain with him. They just saw him glowing in holiness and righteousness. They are just starting to see how frustrating it must be for someone so pure, and righteous, and holy to live among sinful, unbelieving, perverse people. There is no indication that the man, or his boy, or the disciples said something to provoke this. But dealing with a demonic possession simply reminded Jesus of how fallen this world is, and I think he’s giving us a glimpse into what went on in his own head.

The other thing it shows us is that he was now counting down the clock. Though he always knew the end of his ministry would come, it is not on the horizon and he’s counting down the days. He just spoke to Moses and Elijah about his departure. Now he looks forward to the day when he will not have to put up with this sinful world any more. Which reminds him, his disciples did not really yet understand this part. So it was time to remind them again:

**While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.” But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.**

  We can be down on them, but keep in mind what a frantic pace his ministry was going at. They came down the mountain, then the healing, now this. It was a lot to take in. Plus, we know the story. They didn’t. It must have been hard to imagine how that could even happen. They did not know about the secret plans to kill him. They did not think he would be betrayed, and they probably did not think the high priest was the kind of person who would committ murder. They had no way of imagining what he could be talking about. But he made sure to say it clearly and repeatedly, so that after it happened they would remember.

We all know that Jesus died for us, yet it is so easy for us to hear those words without it making an impression. Yet really, even if we hear these words fifty times every day, it should never fail to make an impression on us. Becaue the holy Son of God shed his precious blood for unworthy, ungrateful me. But we often fail to appreciate this because we are too busy thinking about how great we are. As were the disciples:

**An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.**

Why? Possibly because he had chosen only 3 to go up the mountain with him. Or perhaps because some of them had failed to drive out the demon. Maybe they are just getting excited imagining life in Jesus’ kingdom, enjoying fame and fortune. But if this isn’t pathetic, I don’t know what is. But we do this. We can spend so much time obsessed about that other people are doing wrong. That is really just a way of putting ourselves over others. We each have our own self-centered, wicked sinful natures to contend with all day every day. Why do we worry about the speck in our brother or sister’s eye and forget about the plank in our own eye? What does it even mean to be great in God’s eyes? We are not great based on our accomplishments, but on our humility:

**Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.”**

This should solve the problem. Don’t worry about being greatest. Make yourself least. Serve everyone else. Freely admit others are better than you. A little child does not even consider trying to compete in the grown-up world. They know they cannot compete and don’t try. We are not called to compete, we are called to serve. We are called to humble ourselves. We are called to welcome children. But look how stubborn their hearts were:

**“Master,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.”“Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.”**

After all that, John still had to point to that other person. Jesus is holding a giant mirror in front of each of us. He is calling us, “Look here. Take a good look. See how obsessed you are with greatness. Let it all go. And when you’re tired of looking at that ugly thing in the mirror, put it down and look to me, because I am here to suffer and die for you, and to overcome death for you, and to teach you to serve like I have served.”

And in the face of all that John says, “What what about that guy over there? He’s bad, right?” It it turns out, he wasn’t a bad guy, actually, he was doing good things on their side. John’s anger with that man said more about John than it said about the man. We can be so obsessed with putting other people down that we actually hurt people who are doing good. Let’s not point our fingers at each other. Let’s each look in the mirror and look at Jesus. That’s enough. Often when we point the finger at other people it says more about us than it says about them.

**Part F**

Now we have several short episodes all back to back. But this actually marks a key transition point. From this point on in the rest of the gospel, Jesus is on one, long, slow march to Jerusalem. He knows he will not return from there without first dying and rising. There is very little time left.

**As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.**

It’s amazing that James and John wanted to call down fire. Remember, they had been on the mountain. They saw Jesus’ power. But they did not understand it yet. This makes a great contrast with their later careers. James ended up as the first apostle who gave his life for the faith. John, who seems to have been a hothead, later became the apostle of love. When he witnessed firsthand how Jesus laid all that glory aside to die, he came to know the true meaning of love. He is the one who wrote the words, “God is love,” and “You must love one another.”

But meanwhile, the clock is ticking on the way to Jerusalem. These next three requests have to be understood in this light. It’s not so much about following Jesus today, but following him in his ministry on earth:

**As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”**

Jesus was homeless. He would be staying in town after town on his way to Jerusalem. He no longer even had a home base of operations where he could rest. There would be no more retreats. He was on his way to die.

**He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”**

Today, we would never tell someone to skip their parents’ funeral if they wanted to be a Christian. But if this man wanted to follow Jesus, he had to follow him now, because the time was short. By the time the funeral was over, Jesus would be long gone.

**Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”**

Of course, the man did not want to have a simple two-minute “goodbye”, but a feast, a cry-fest, etc. But this has a lesson for us as well. “The disciple cannot hang onto the old life and be prepared for the rigors of discipleship. Jesus wants to make this truth clear from the start. Salvation is not a road paved with ease, for true spirituality takes discipline. The picture of looking back while plowing is apt, since in Palestine the terrain is rugged. To look back while plowing was asking to make mistakes in preparing the field. The task required a focused eye on what lay ahead. So discipleship demands attention to the rough road before us. To look back risks being knocked off course.”

Beginning Wednesday we have the chance to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. If you cannot make the services, I encourage you to read the chapters sometime during the week at home. We have come a long way in our journey with Jesus that started in December, but there is still a long way to go. Amen.