

Scriptures: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

Love Never Ends

We started this series, “Love Never Ends,” in the Gospel of Luke, looking at Jesus’ baptism, and then spent the rest of our time this Epiphany season in Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Over the last couple weeks we’ve listened in on Paul’s conversation with the Corinthian Church as he attempted to unravel the twisted mess in which they had found themselves. Through it all, we heard a consistent message – that people matter. Each individual person matters, and are a part of the whole. And in the last two weeks, we’ve even taken a glimpse into eternity to discover that grace – the essence which matters – continues on beyond our limited field of vision. Today we’re returning to Luke’s Gospel, to hear again his telling of the event we call the Transfiguration. Today is, after all, Transfiguration Sunday in the Church calendar. It’s a day when we remember Jesus temporarily revealing a change in Himself to a few of His closest followers – they momentarily were able to see Him in all His glory. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 9:28-36. I’ll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Luke 9:28-36.**

The passage we just looked at takes place shortly after a conversation Jesus had with His disciples while they were in the area of Caesarea Philippi. He had asked them who people were saying He was, and they gave various answers – John the Baptist, who had already been executed by Herod, Elijah, or some other prophet of old. Then Jesus asks them who they say He is, and Peter answers “The Messiah – the Deliverer – of God.” Jesus tells His disciples that “if anyone is going to follow Him, they have to deny themselves, and take up their crosses daily and follow,” (Luke 9:23). “About eight days after Jesus said this, He took Peter, John and James with Him and went up onto a mountain to pray,” (Luke 9:28), Luke records.

Peter, John, and James were really close to Jesus. Today we might call them His leadership team. They know Him pretty well. They were with Him when He healed Jairus’ daughter, in Luke 8, and were also with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane while He was praying on the night He was betrayed. They were involved in the inner workings of His ministry, and helped guide the group, especially after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Biblical scholars disagree about the mountain on which the Transfiguration happened. The traditional site, known as Mount Tabor, lies about 11 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. It’s an 18 hour walk from the town Jesus was last in. It even has a Franciscan church on top of it known as the Church of the Transfiguration. Other Bible scholars think that the Transfiguration occurred on Mount Hermon, because Caesarea Philippi is situated at the foot of that mountain, and it’s higher. Luke doesn’t record

which mountain this was, so we don't know precisely where the Transfiguration of Christ occurred, but we know it happened.

Prayer Changes Things

“As He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning,” (verse 29), Luke tells us next. Picture that in your mind. Jesus, who looks like an ordinary person, just like us, suddenly appears different. He's literally glowing! The Word who said, “Let there be light,” becomes Incarnate Light. Can you imagine that? Standing next to an old friend, in this case Jesus, and out of no where, He starts shining as brightly as a flash of lightning? Standing there beside the three apostles, Jesus outshines the sun in the sky! If seeing that didn't inspire awe and fear in them, I don't know what would! Did you catch what Jesus was doing when this happens? He's praying. He's talking to the Father.

Prayer changes things, doesn't it? In this case, it changes the appearance of Jesus Christ, and lets the three disciples see Him as He truly is – and how we will one day be. Prayer changes things. About a week and a half ago I sent out an email asking you all to pray for our sister Connie, specifically that she would have a quick surgery and make a full recovery. When the surgery was canceled, I followed it up a day later asking you to pray that she would feel minimal pain and the comforting touch of the Great Physician even in that moment. Friends, sometimes we pray about things – we pray for things – and He answers in ways we don't expect. Jesus heard our prayers for Connie, and He answered them in the way He knew was best. We celebrated Connie's life of faithful service to Jesus on Thursday, and it was a beautiful time with family and friends.

Jesus loves us best, we just need to trust Him, that He's got our best interests in mind. He's been taking, and He'll keep on taking, good care of us. We have a world full of hurting people – literally – who are not thinking at all about what's in the best interests of others. The pointless conflict occurring right now between Russia and Ukraine is a classic example of this. They have a crazy dictator over there wanting to resurrect the Soviet Union. Putin's been in power in some capacity for close to a quarter century. He's been involved either as a Prime Minister or President for nearly 25 years. That's too long. And since he's been in power, those people haven't had a fair election.

He wasn't even elected to come into power in the first place. President Yeltsin appointed him to the Prime Ministry, and then Putin – he's an old KGB chief – used fake news to cast Yeltsin as an old, dementia suffering drunk, and push him into resigning so he could succeed to the Presidency. In a way, Putin's rise to power is very similar to Hitler's once President Hindenburg died in 1934. They have sham elections every so often over there, and they'll have televised debates, and the three or four candidates running against Putin will make statements towards the end of the debates

to the effect that everyone should vote for Putin, because he's the only one fit for the job. That's what they do. They say they are planning to vote for Putin in the election. If they don't say this, they end up "disappearing," or assassinated.

My point in telling you all this is to remind you to pray about the situation going on over there. Pray for the Ukrainian and Russian people. Pray for the leadership of both countries – and of our country. Pray that the Prince of Peace would make Himself known. Jesus, shine a spotlight into the hearts of those all around the world who aren't thinking about how better to love God and neighbor. Amen.

Glorious Splendor

Getting back to our Scripture this morning, Luke tells us the next thing the disciples see. "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem," (Luke 9:30-31). Here we see two great friends and servants of God from the Old Testament Scriptures, who had died, but notice what Luke records – they "appeared in glorious splendor." And they're talking with Jesus about His coming death on the cross. Isn't that remarkable? Notice what's said about the disciples.

"Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him," (verse 32). Pete and the guys always seemed to be sleepy in the Scriptures, didn't they? The night Christ was betrayed they were sleeping in the Garden while He was praying. Notice what Peter and the others see – two men – Moses and Elijah aren't ghosts. They aren't vapory beings. They've got visible, physical bodies – glorious, glorified bodies – which is what Jesus' body temporarily is in this moment, and permanently after His resurrection on Easter morning. Friends, it's the same sort of body we get when we leave this place and go on to join the Church Triumphant already with Him! Luke's Gospel is the only one which explains what the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was about.

Seeing Jesus literally glowing, and two guys talking with Him who hadn't been there moments before would definitely be a wake-up call! And they weren't just any two, run-of-the-mill guys – they were Moses and Elijah! Heroes of the Jewish faith! "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.)," (verse 33) Luke tells us. Peter wants the visit by these historical powerhouses to last for a little longer, so he offers to pitch tents on the top of the mountain for them to stay in.

Tunnel Vision

Peter has a case of tunnel vision. He wants to stay in the moment. He doesn't want the moment to end. He wants things to be this way, always. It's a nice idea, but

it's not appropriate, because Jesus still has His greatest work yet to do. What is Jesus' greatest work? He has to destroy sin on Good Friday's cross, and destroy death in Resurrection Sunday's empty tomb! Sometimes the Church can get that way, too – of wanting to just be this way, always. When we do, we start to become stagnant. It would be easy for us to become stagnant, but it's not appropriate, because Jesus still has His greatest work yet to do through us – of making Himself known for the transforming – the transfiguration, the changing – of the world.

“While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud,” (verse 34). Picture that. Peter's talking, and a cloud surrounds them while he's talking. I know you've seen fog before. Can you imagine being in such thick fog that you can't see an arm's length in front of you? That's what I picture here. The reason it's frightening to the disciples is that they know the Old Testament stories. God shows up in a pillar of cloud to lead people by day, and a pillar of fire to guide and protect them by night. They know they're in the presence of God – and they're afraid.

“A voice came from the cloud, saying, ‘This is My Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him,’” (verse 35). We know who speaks from the cloud – so did Peter, James, and John – it's God the Father. Luke closes his take on the Transfiguration by saying, “when 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,” (verse 36). They were probably still thinking through what they'd seen and heard.

In Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, he records that “when the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified,” (Matt. 17:6). In that account, Jesus has to touch them and tell them to not be afraid. Can you imagine having a face-to-face encounter with the Living God? That's what these guys had that day. They saw Jesus changed – transfigured – chatting like old friends should and do with a couple guys who had been dead for a 1,000 years or more.

Revealing Who He Is

What happened on that mountain wasn't so much a change into something different, but more a revealing of the essence of the One who was changed. Jesus became who He was on that mountain, even though He was who He was as He climbed up and then down it again. He is always who He is. He's always present in the fullness of His being. We can only see part of Him, the part we need at the given moment. We experience just a piece of Jesus Christ, and we get used to that, like the disciples did.

But once in awhile, we catch glimpses of something greater. Once in awhile we hear a word that reverberates in our soul for weeks, or maybe a lifetime. Once in awhile a tear comes to our eye as we stand on the mountaintop, and a lump comes to

our throat as we encounter anew the depths of His love and sacrifice. Once in awhile we catch a glimpse of His face, and we see the love – love so deep He was willing to die. Love so powerful that everything is changed by it. Faithful love that goes on and on, even in the midst of our selfishness and unfaithfulness. In Jesus Christ we see a love greater than ours – His love never ends.

Prayer: Eternal God, You revealed to the disciples the everlasting glory of Jesus Christ. Grant us, who have not seen and yet believe, the gift of Your Holy Spirit, that we may boldly live the gospel and shine with Your transforming glory, as people changed and changing through the redeeming presence of our Savior. Amen.