

## **“Returning to the Real World”**

3 March 2019: Last Sunday (Transfiguration) after the Epiphany

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 9:28-43

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**“Even God cannot change the past”**

**(—Agathon, c. 448 – c. 400 BCE).**

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Hear now the day’s lesson:

**28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 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.**

**33 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. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36 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.**

The first part of today’s lesson concerns God’s glory on the mountain. Yet, Jesus and the three disciples must depart the mountaintop to return to the real world. “On the next day” is a phrase joining two textual segments: God’s glory and a painful imperfect world. Hear a report of a son’s suffering. Note also the disciples’ failure to help. The disciples’ failure prompts a frustrated Jesus to ask “how much longer must I be with you.” Hear the lesson’s balance:

**37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” 41 Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astounded at the greatness of God (Luke 9:28-43).**

We hear this story each year on “Transfiguration Sunday” as related by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Even if we have never been to the mountaintop ourselves, we yet like to hear about others having the

experience. But what happens after the mountaintop experience? After all, if you go up the mountain, then you must come down. What happens to Peter and the others as they descend?

From a mountaintop moment, disciples return to the drudgery of the human world of pain, disease, and death. No wonder Peter said it was good that they were on the mountain and should build three dwelling places. When in a place of joy, rarely do we want to return to the everyday world. Yet, Jesus, as the prophets before him, always forces disciples to look at their world—where the rain of God’s grace falls on the just and the unjust (see Mt 5:45). A prophet is a person “who afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted.” Jesus’ lesson concerns prophetic discipleship.

The healing of an epileptic child offers no fewer than three discipleship teachings. First, disciples alternate their lives between the mountain of joy and our Christ-needy world. Given human nature, we overindulge one side of the human-divine equation. Two candles adorn our church’s altar. These candles represent Jesus’ incarnation. One candle symbolizes Jesus’ divinity; the other Jesus’ humanity. Thus, we understand Jesus’ essential nature as fully human/fully divine. Jesus represents the fusion of God and humankind.

Early in the twentieth century, American Christianity wrestled with two primary heresies; each heresy as old as the Jesus movement. One side of the dispute comprised people retreating from the world’s problems. These persons focused on their own spiritual needs while ignoring the world’s troubles. People often used the transfiguration story of the disciples seeing Moses, Elijah, and Jesus to support a theology of retreat. Conversely, others practiced “the Social Gospel.” Although deeply dedicated Christians, their focus was to put the world’s affairs in order. On occasion, they neglected their own spiritual lives. Via the Transfiguration story and a healing of a boy with a demon, Luke helps believers understand both personal and communal discipleship. Could this be why Luke links these two very different stories together?

A second discipleship lesson is that Jesus’ power over evil enables disciples to do what needs done. A balance between divine and human keeps our lives situated between the poles of joy and service. If we look too long toward heaven, we miss our calling. If we worry too much about how to live out the nitty-gritty of Christian service, we may forget God’s power that sustains our benevolent efforts. James Tillis was an Oklahoma cowboy who boxed in Chicago in the 1980s. He told about his first day in Chicago arriving from Tulsa. “I got off the bus with two cardboard suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, ‘I’m going to conquer Chicago.’ When I looked down, my suitcases were gone.” The simple point is that to do God’s work we look up and down; but neither direction too long. We look up for God’s guidance and down to see our people needing God’s resources.

Luke’s third discipleship lesson reminds us that a chief stumbling block for disciples is the tedium of our hard, and often frustrating, work. Boredom is a seductive enemy of the Christian life because many important things we do are routine. We perform similar actions over and over. Bible study is unlike any other kind of studying. It is too deep and too vital to master. I have never heard anyone say that she/he knows scripture too well. We return to the Bible again and again. The same is true of prayer. Prayer is such a crucial element of our relationship with God that we can never master it. Vital prayer is always growing and evolving and deepening.

We all know what it is like to give our best effort and hear someone say in gratitude, “Thank you for your wonderful Sunday school lesson. I look forward to next week. I’m sure your next lesson will be just

as good.” These praises have an inborn potential to destroy. Each time we do something well, a similar occasion rolls around again. We live the Christian life in a habitual, but important, manner time and again. It is easy to simply give up and put our discipleship on “cruise control.” It may be hard for you to believe, but for preachers Sunday comes up just about every other day!

Whether one is a Sunday school teacher, a Stephen minister, a teacher/student of Disciple Bible Study, a VBS worker, or whatever—whenever we finish one task, there is another waiting. The Christian life can potentially make one both a bored and a boring person, if we do not capture the beauty and grace of the Christian life. We need the fire of the Spirit to continue to bring energy and creativity to those repetitive, but important tasks that Christ calls us to do.

Jesus seems to tell us that looking up is vital to our relationship with God, but that by our looking down, we can fulfill God’s will.

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