

Luke 9:28-36
February 27, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two weeks ago, we heard of Jesus coming down the mountain to meet the crowd and teach on a level place. It truly is good news Jesus went down that mountain to meet the people of God right where they were at, on level ground. But, as we know that ground often develops potholes and traverses down into deep, dark valleys. Also, good news is that this Jesus who came down the mountain will go meet the world in those places as well.

We need that God right now in the world as bombs pierce through the night sky and find their targets in cities across Ukraine. As people hunker in subway terminals, makeshift bomb shelters, with only a few belongings and provisions. We watch from afar praying for the people of Ukraine. Our prayers join theirs as the first day of the Russian invasion I watched a small group of Ukrainians gathered in a circle on a street corner, on bended knee, praying. Amidst their fear and dire situation at hand maybe it was all they could think to do.

Indeed, right now, the world needs the Jesus that goes down the mountain into those subway stations where people escape the brutality of war thrust upon them by a ruler intent on gaining power and control at the expense of innocent lives lost. The world needs a God waiting on the other side of a border to welcome women and children searching for safety as their fathers, husbands, and sons stay behind to put their life on the line for the sake of freedom.

A theology of the cross tells us God came down. Jesus journeys through the darkest of valleys with humanity and meets it right where it is. Encounters and endures pain and suffering.

Joins those who flee for safety to a foreign land recalling Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus fled to Egypt for safety as, yet another empire of the day took aim at the innocent. A theology of the cross assures us of a God who ventures down the mountain into every imaginable place we might find ourselves located in. This indeed is the Son of God we meet in Luke's gospel, all gospels for that matter.

But today and other times in Luke's gospel, we observe Jesus going back up that mountain. The story of his transfiguration seems so otherworldly to me. Instead of the three, Peter, James, and John, which have the good fortune to go with him and see first-hand this further revelation of who Jesus is, it's easier for me to enter this story joined to the nine left behind down the mountain. Perhaps, asking questions such as, "What about me Jesus?" "Why didn't you take the rest of us?" "What's so special about Peter, James and John?" "Why are you leaving us alone again?"

Yet, then I take a step back, see the big picture of God from the dawn of creation, see the God that never failed to forget his people while enslaved by another dictator in the Egyptian leader, Pharaoh and led them out of that terror into a land of hope, new life, and for the moment safety. I see the God who didn't leave them alone as they wandered through the wilderness and into the promised land. A God who came to them even amidst their grumbling they would have been better off in Egypt and provided food and water.

We see a God who met Moses on another mountain and equipped him with the gift of the law intent on ensuring their relationship with God and with one another. We could go on and on with example after example of a God who remains steadfast in his promise to be with his covenantal people, not distant in some far-off time and place.

Jesus' mountaintop experience as challenging as it may be to comprehend isn't one in which he abandons us or those left behind at the foot of the mountain. It's one that most likely equips him in his journey back down the mountain, to encounter evil powers, a kingdom that runs counter to God's, encounter illness and death and equips him for another mountain in which the glory of who he is, who God is, will be revealed in a way the world has never witnessed. Glory found not in the power of weapons or instilling fear in another. Glory not found in strength or might. Glory not found in words of hatred or revenge. No, the glory of God in Jesus will be found in weakness, vulnerability and yes, as much as we like to not speak of it, death. Jesus goes back up another mountain on which a cross is located not for his sake, but for our sake. For the world's sake. For the sake of all those left at the foot of the mountain hunkered down in fear, feeling lost and forsaken, help captive to sin and death.

How does this experience equip Jesus for what is to come? The last time in Luke's gospel Jesus was high upon a mountain he was alone. Praying to God. Just prior to appointing his twelve apostles. His mountaintop experience would seem to draw him nearer to the one he calls "Father," the one who sent him into the world. His mountain top moments of prayer appear to give him insight and clarity for what is to come. There is a slight difference in today's mountaintop experience. Jesus isn't alone. While not all nine traverse that mountain, three are invited.

Perhaps, those three stand in for not just the twelve but the large crowd that has been following him. Perhaps, those three stand in for all to come. But it's not just Jesus and the three. Something else happens through his time in prayer. Two others come alongside, Moses and Elijah.

Further, in that mountaintop moment Jesus himself is changed. Listen to the text, "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning."

This passage has enough in it for a hundred sermons. One could unpack the significance of Moses and Elijah or focus on the fact the word that is translated as "departure" is literally "exodus." Yet maybe we don't need to dig that deep at this point in time. Maybe we just need to know prayer made a difference in Jesus' life. It changed him. God did something through his prayers not only in Jesus' life but also did something in the lives of those gathered and those to come. Jesus' time in prayer yet again opened a window for the world to see his true identity, perhaps even opened the sleepy eyes of Peter, James, and John to fully see what God was doing in Jesus. Jesus' time in prayer gave his followers a model for life in the flesh. We need time on the mountain in prayer as it is one way in which God draws near to us and subsequently, we draw near to God. It is one way God opens our eyes to see more clearly Jesus with us and see Jesus at work in the world, not absent and still on a mountain top, but standing alongside God's people.

Because that's exactly what he does upon coming down that mountain. The first thing Luke tells us is Jesus spots another son held captive by a spirit throwing him into convulsions. He spots a father pleading Jesus to provide healing. He sees that son. He hears that father. He acts and all witnessed the "greatness of God."

The greatness of God does not end on the mountain. The greatness of God shows up often in the least likely of places and in the least likely of people. The greatness of God is made manifest in life and it is made manifest in death, Jesus' death which is made complete by his resurrection which we fully see the greatness of God to overcome death. Overcome evil. Overcome illness. Overcome sin. Those disciples caught a vision on that mountain and through Jesus' life, death and resurrection so have we. A vision of the God that was, is and will always be. A vision of a kingdom without war, without viruses and pandemics, without division, without weapons of destruction, without fear, without bullies and enemies, without pain and heartache. A vision of a level place in Jesus reigns and the greatness of God shines brighter than a flash of lightning.