

Great Expectations

Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2010

Luke 9: 28-36 (37-43)

Whitefish UMC

- † Here's a story about a little boy who was riding his wagon down the sidewalk. Suddenly, one of the wheels fell off. The little boy jumped out of the wagon and said, "I'll be damned!"
- † A minister happened to be walking by at just that moment, and he said, "Son, you ought not use words like that! That's a bad word. When something happens, just say, 'Praise the Lord!' and everything will be all right." So the little boy grumbled and put the wheel back on the wagon and started on down the sidewalk.
- † About ten yards farther, the wheel fell off again. The little boy said, "Praise the Lord!" Suddenly, the wheel jumped up off the ground and put itself right back on the wagon. And the minister saw it all and exclaimed, "I'll be damned."
- † Here we are, by chance, at the coinciding of two special and strange days: Valentine's Day and Transfiguration Sunday; so we needed that silly joke. About the only thing these days have in common is that they concern either great or diminished expectations.
- † As a child, I loved Valentine's Day. Do you remember making Valentine's Day mailboxes out of shoeboxes—decorating them, having contests to see whose was the prettiest or most original, eating cupcakes in school,

receiving Valentines from everyone, wondering whether the person you really liked would give you a special valentine?

- † My mother would make a very big deal out of Valentine’s Day. She’d decorate the house, make special foods, including red Jello hearts, and shower us with creative ways of showing her love. So I grew up expecting that Valentine’s Day would always be wonderful.
- † But of course it wasn’t. Love, though often grand, just as often disappoints. The other night, ABC Comedy Wednesday devoted three TV programs in a row to that subject. And they were funny because the premise is true. The mountaintop experiences of love rarely come when you expect them.
- † But the reverse is true as well. Often, the greatest “aha moments” of love are a surprise and occur in times that you least expect. The other day I spoke to my mother, now diminished in many ways by Alzheimer’s disease. It’s quite a project to get to speak to her, since her phone has been taken away so she doesn’t randomly dial just anyone.
- † When she finally got to the phone, it took her a moment for her to recognize who I was. Then, as she often does, she began to ask me questions so she could remember our relationship. “Are you married to Tom Schmidt?” “And you have one son, Carey Schmidt?” “Yes,” and “Yes,” I answered. But then she began to babble a series of random words, and my heart fell.
- † Then, just as suddenly, my mother asked, “Are you a minister in Whitefish, Montana?” “Yes,” I said. And then she said “Have I ever told you how proud of you I am?” I have to confess that I was almost speechless. Because before my mother’s descent into Alzheimer’s, I had often felt superfluous in her esteem as her world revolved increasingly around my other sisters and their families.

- † What an unexpected gift of love my mother's affirmation was. And how I smiled at the irony of her words, coming when and as they did. Like the minister in the little joke about the boy and his wagon, I thought the equivalent of his punchline: "I'll be damned."
- † The disciples must have experienced something like my surprise on their trip up the mountain with Jesus. They must have been exhausted by the nonstop demands of the crowds. Recently they were sent off with power and authority into the same needy crowds to cure, proclaim, and heal. They've been told, right in the middle of it, by Jesus himself of his coming great suffering, rejection, and death—and about his rising on the third day.
- † Eight days later they are reeling and in no shape for mountain climbing, even if its purpose is to pray. Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers who mentions prayer as the reason for their ascent. Why can't they just pray where they are?
- † Once up on the mountain top, Jesus appears to be doing all the praying. His followers can hardly keep their eyes open—another detail unique to Luke's account, which connects the mountain of transfiguration and the Mount of Olives (where Jesus would descend to his crucifixion), unlikely twin sites of glory's face and backside.
- † But here, before sleep can overcome the three, they are startled by a flash of radiance. Jesus, who must have reached the summit just as sweaty and dusty as they did, now shines with the light of heaven itself. Heidi Neumark describes it so beautifully this way: "The rough fabric of his clothing shimmers like a swath of sunstruck water. The disciples behold the glory of God. They see two men as well.
- † Luke identifies the two men as Moses and Elijah; appearing in glory, they speak of Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The word “departure” comes from the Greek word for “exodus,” referring not only to the trip down the mountain and into Jerusalem, but to Jesus’ death.

- † Moses’ presence makes the connection unavoidable; now Jesus will accomplish a second exodus, leading people safely through the waters of death, even as his own flesh is parted in waves of pain on the cross. But this talk of exodus and death in the midst of transfiguration is lost on the disciples.”
- † Luke describes the disciples as confused and stunned by their experience. And I can relate. I remember a scene from Herman Wouk’s book, War and Remembrance. It’s the sequel to his Winds of War. They are really long but great stories of struggle and suffering and perseverance during World War II.
- † A young mother, Natalie, is reunited with her child, Louis, after their terrible ordeal in a concentration camp. Louis has suffered so much that he is unable or refuses to speak. But when he is returned to his mother’s arms, she sings him a familiar lullaby, and he slowly begins to sing along with her.
- † Two men who have helped accomplish the reunion “each put a hand over his eyes, as if dazzled by an unbearable, sudden light.” Sometimes, it’s best to shield our eyes and remain speechless in the face of such glorious, unexpected love.
- † Then there is the story told by a surgeon about a young couple, when the doctor had to perform a disfiguring surgery on the wife so that she could survive. As a result of the surgery, the young woman would never be able to smile on one side of her face again.

- † The surgeon felt very bad about this and watched with a heavy heart while the young husband went into his wife’s room and saw her for the first time, a line drawing her mouth down on one side.
- † “I think it’s kind of cute, your crooked little smile.” The doctor said he had to look away from these two young people, as if the light were too bright for him to bear. Of course the road ahead for that young couple would need that bright light to shine on in the days and years to come.
- † We have seen transfigurations—lives changed by the light of God’s love—down here in the valley as well as on the mountaintops. Sometimes we have to slog and struggle to see them. And sometimes we just have to pay attention. We have to turn off our cell phones and our computers and our TV’s and our iPods long enough to notice.
- † We can experience transforming love when we share our stories and our fragile hopes. God is there, in our suffering and in every moment of rescue, restoration, and resurrection. But be careful—the light is so bright you may have to shield your eyes.
- † The truth is that every time we experience love, forgiveness, healing, God’s grace in our lives, we are changed forever. But we have to listen to Jesus, as the voice from the mountaintop commands from the clouds.
- † “Listen for dear life. Listen to words of forgiveness and mercy, promises of paradise, words from the cross. Listen without ceasing, on the edge of glory and on the brink of death. I beg you to look at my son, a father cries out, in the verses immediately following the story of the Transfiguration. It echoes another voice: “Here is my only begotten son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him.”

† Listen on this hill and on another where darkness closes in.” Lent lies ahead of us. The road to Jerusalem lies before us. We will need the light of the mountaintop to show us the way.

† Finally, let’s close with a poem by Kathy Coffey, who teaches English at the University of Colorado, Denver, and Regis College. It’s called “After the Transfiguration.”

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Grinding up the steep incline,
our calves throbbing,
we talked of problems
and slapped at flies.
Then you touched my shoulder,
said, "turn around."

† Behind us floated
surprise mountains
blue on lavender,
water-colored ranges:
a glimpse from God's eyes.

† Descending, how could we chat
mundanely of the weather, like deejays?
We wondered if, returning,
James and John had squabbled:
whose turn to fetch the water,
after the waterfall of grace?

† After he imagined the shining tents,
did Peter's walls seem narrow,

smell of rancid fish?
Did feet that poised on Tabor
cross the cluttered porch?
After the bleached light,
could eyes adjust to ebbing
grey and shifting shade?

† Cradling the secret in their sleep
did they awaken cautiously,
wondering if the mountaintop
would gild again-bringing
that voice, that face?

† May we live in great expectation of God’s shining grace—the sweetest
Valentine of all. And may the God-light illumine our days, even the darkest
ones. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. Robert Sims, “Connections that Count,” <http://day1.org>

Heidi Neumark, “Altitude Adjustment,” <http://findarticles.com>

Kate Huey, “Astounding Glory,” <http://www.ucc.org>

Kathy Coffey, “After the Transfiguration,” <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu>

