Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

February 27, 2022

Luke 9:28-36

“And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen.”

I used to think that this was strange. Why wouldn’t Peter, James, and John have told anyone about what happened to them on the mountain top with Jesus? It was kind of a big deal.

As I was wondering about this yet again this past week, the words from the nativity story popped into my head. The part where Mary treasured all the things that happened and pondered them in her heart.

Encountering God is a transformative experience. It changes who we are, often in ways that are hard to explain. And it happens so suddenly and unexpectedly, that it can be hard to understand what actually happened.

It would have been overwhelming enough, I imagine, just to see Jesus transfigured. Or just to see Moses and Elijah. Or just to hear the voice from the heavens, declaring Jesus to be the Son of God and telling them to listen to him.

But when you add all three of those things together…it’s no wonder they couldn’t put words together to tell anyone. It had to be hard for Peter, James, and John to believe it wasn’t a dream.

And at some point, maybe they wondered why *they* were the ones who got to experience it, and not the rest of the 12. Having *that kind* of certainty that God exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, and then putting that into the context of everything they’d heard him say, everything they’d seen him do…and all the things that happened *after* they went down the mountain?

Perhaps they didn’t tell anyone because they didn’t have the words to explain what happened.

I don’t know how many times I’ve read the story of the transfiguration over the years. But I *can* tell you that it wasn’t until Friday afternoon that it occurred to me that “they” in verse 36 could include Jesus.

I’d always understood “they” as meaning that Peter, James, and John didn’t tell anyone about what happened. But maybe Luke intended for us to understand this to mean that none of the *four* people who went up the mountain said anything.

We tend to read the Gospels from the perspectives of Jesus’ followers. How were *they* affected by what Jesus said and did?

When did we last wonder how ***Jesus*** was affected?

It’s hard for us to figure out how being fully human and fully divine worked for Jesus. As we’ll hear next week, we know he wasn’t immune to temptation, but he didn’t give into it. We know he enjoyed sharing meals with his followers. We know he had divine abilities to heal people. We know he had a unique understanding of the will of God for creation.

But we *don’t* hear Jesus talk about what it was like to hear the voice from the heavens at his baptism, God declaring his love for Jesus. Or how what it felt like to stand amidst the cloud and hear God say, “this is my Son, my Chosen.”

But it seems clear that those words sustained him in the wilderness as he faced temptation. So maybe they echoed in his mind and his heart as he encountered those who tried to stop him, those who sought to have him killed.

And, perhaps, they sustained him as he hung on the cross and died.

Luke specifically tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him when he went up on the mountain *to pray*.

I think that Luke includes this detail because he wants us to be aware of the importance of prayer. As my Sunday School teachers used to tell us, if Jesus took time to pray, so should we.

But by including it with this particular story, I think that we’re meant to see that prayer has transformative potential. That it opens us to hearing from God, experiencing God’s mercy and grace and love, and being changed by God because of it.

And while we can pray anywhere, going to a different place, like going up a mountain, has the power to disorient us, confuse our bearings. It pulls us away from the familiar and opens us to a new way of seeing the world.

All of which gives God new ways to get our attention.

When I was on my mini sabbatical last fall, I spent time reading books that I’d chosen to expand my perspective on how to understand God. I tried on some new habits. I spent time in prayer, trying to give over my worries to God.

But the single most transformative moment was when I got in my car and drove to Tolovana Beach, and just sat there, watching the ocean.

And suddenly, I felt a wave of something I still can’t quite explain, washing over me.

After weeks of feeling like I was spiraling downward, worn out from worry over *so many things* beyond my control, feeling anxious and overwhelmed…I was overcome by this feeling of…fullness.

I don’t have adequate words to describe it. But as it was happening, I knew that I both didn’t want it to end but was almost afraid to let it keep going. It was simultaneously comforting and unsettling and, for a fleeting moment, I felt complete.

Since then, I have come to believe that moment was a hint of what it feels like to experience God’s glory. To be filled up with God’s love so that I was assured of God’s presence, confident God could heal my brokenness.

But no matter how amazing it is, eventually, we have to go down the mountain and attend to the work we’re given. So I drove away.

Life did not suddenly become better. The hard work that I knew I needed to begin on my sabbatical was not complete. It is still not complete, months later.

But every time I go to Tolovana Park to sit and be still, or even just pass by on the road, I’m reminded that God doesn’t always answer our prayers by changing our circumstances. Sometimes, God answers our prayers by changing *us.*

And that’s what makes it important for us to do the things that allow us to be open to the kind of transformative experience that Peter, James, John, and Jesus had.

They make it easier for us, after we’ve come down from the mountain, to see how God is changing us, how God is acting in the world. How God sustains us for the path that lies before us.

I can’t speak for Peter, James, or John. But in that moment, there by the beach, I felt about as sure as I ever have that God exists, that God hears my prayers, and that God loves me. *That* is grace which has sustained me every day since then.

And it is my hope that you find yourself on a mountaintop one day, and feel God’s love wash over you. And you go down that mountain, sustained by God’s grace wherever God leads you.