CULDEE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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LUKE 9:28-43a
“THE TRANSFIGURATION”

SO WHAT: The story of the transfiguration of Jesus and the healing of the epileptic boy offer us a glimpse of Jesus identity and mission as well as a description of true discipleship in the world.

Now, if we are honest, we will need to confess that the story of Jesus’ transfiguration is not the easiest story to take in and digest. I fear that it is one of those stories that many people skip over and save it for another day. Well, we are going to jump in and see if we can figure this thing out…or at least begin to get a handle on it. Now, for Luke this story follows the first prediction of Jesus approaching death—and this is important. For, as we keep the question “who is this” before us, we will quickly see that the one who will be crucified is not just another martyr in a lost cause; this is the Son of God, who continues God’s work of redemption in the world.

First, our text begins with a familiar image of Jesus—he is heading off for a time of prayer. From his baptism all the way to the cross, we constantly see Jesus in a posture of prayer. No matter how many people were pressing in on Jesus; no matter how many people needed healing; no matter how many people needed to hear the word of God; no matter what was on his schedule for the day, it seems that Jesus always took to time to ground his life and work in prayer and the presence of God. Let this be a challenge to us to be as careful and intentional with our own prayer lives.

Second, let us see that the story of the transfiguration bears witness to Jesus being the continuation of God’s redemptive work. Jesus is suddenly seen with Moses and Elijah.
Moses—was the giver of the law; he reminds us of the past—the exodus event and the communal responsibility to teach the statutes and ordinances given to Moses at Horeb. Elijah—represented the prophets; he was the prophet who will one day turn people’s hearts back to the covenant. Thus, Jesus is seen as being connected—a continuation and a fulfillment—of Israel’s past and future.

Third, let us see that the story of the transfiguration foreshadows Jesus’ death and crucifixion. The three—Jesus, Moses and Elijah are pictured as standing and engaging in a conversation about Jesus’ approaching departure, which lies ahead in Jesus destination of Jerusalem. Literally, the word that has been translated here “departure” means exodus—or going out. Figuratively it refers to death or departure. Remember, Jesus has already mentioned this to the disciples, so here we sort of have a confirmation of what he had mentioned to them. But the transfiguration also hints at a truth for Jesus and all believers…death will not be the final word in this story. Two things happen that hint at this truth. First, while Jesus is praying we are told that the appearance of his face changed and that his clothes became dazzling white—which allowed the disciples to see the full glory of Jesus. And second, towards the end of the mountain top experience, a cloud came down and over shadowed them. They were terrified because they knew they were on holy ground and in the presence of God—remember that in the Old Testament clouds are associated with the presence of God. And let us not forget the story of Jesus’ ascension—where a cloud removes Jesus from their sight. While it is more subtle than the connection with the law and prophets, the transfiguration points us forward to Jesus’ death and resurrection.
Now, our good friend Peter has an interesting response to seeing Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah. He wanted to build booths and stay on the mountaintop—he wanted to savor the moment and extend it indefinitely. This is always a temptation—even for us. It is so easy to want to hang-on to and extend those mountain top experiences; we want to hold on to them and relive them day after day. But you see, discipleship is not about sustaining those spiritual highs, no matter how great they may be. It just isn’t possible. True discipleship involves continuing the journey—going on and following Jesus. Faithfulness is not about freezing a moment in time but by continuing on in confidence that God is leading the way. This is why the story does not end here—on the mountain top, but continues down into the valley.

No sooner had Jesus descended from the mountain top than the demands and disappointments of life were upon him. Down in the valley a man with a son besieged by a spirit approaches Jesus. It would often seize the boy and causes him to convulse until he foamed at the mouth and then it would maul him. Now, while they were bringing the boy to Jesus, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. That word translated “dashed” him is very vivid—it is the word that could be used of a boxer dealing a knock-out blow to his opponent. But the disciples were helpless to cure him. But Jesus comes and rebukes the unclean spirit, heals the boy, and gives him back to his father. Clearly Jesus did not come simply to be exalted and glorified on a mountaintop…he came to descend into the depths of human hurt and pain in order to bring the healing and grace of God to all who are in need.

The beginning of our text gives us something to think about and reflect on as we try and connect Jesus to Israel’s past and future—the law and the prophets—Moses and Elijah; and our
gaze is also directed toward Jerusalem and the death and resurrection of Jesus. But we also have the very practical experience of Jesus healing a demon possessed boy. You see, this is a great picture of a life of faith. Professing faith in Jesus Christ is important—very important. But living our Christian faith requires more than simply professing with our mouths; it requires that our profession match our actions. Thomas Groome, a Christian religious educator in the Roman Catholic tradition, reminds us that to truly live the Christian faith involves believing, trusting and doing God’s will.

Amen.