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Luke 9:18-36

GREAT REVELATIONS

For the last three weeks, I have been in and out of the ophthalmologist's office multiple times in an effort to see. First I had my annual eye exam, after which they changed my prescription. The vision shop issued me new contact lenses. I put them in and wore them for a day when I returned and said to them, "I can see out of these. Let's go back to the old prescription." Then we needed to update my glasses. I returned to the shop to pick up the new glasses and right away I could tell they weren't right. The shop attendant encouraged me to wear them for a few days to try them out. But last Sunday as I stood in the pulpit wearing the new lenses, all your faces were a blur and I couldn't read fine print on labels. So back I went to the shop. They sent me back to the doctor's office where they re-checked my eyes. Sure enough, the first prescription wasn't quite right. So, now I am awaiting my second pair of eyeglasses and I am hoping for that moment when I put them on and suddenly I can see with great clarity.

The story we read from Luke's gospel today, that event Jesus had up on the mountain which is called the Transfiguration, is a moment when we can see with great clarity. Two important revelations are offered to us at the Transfiguration. The first revelation allows us to see Jesus with great clarity. The second revelation enables us to see ourselves with great clarity.

But the revelation of Jesus' identity starts before he goes up that mountain. It begins eight days earlier when Jesus asks his disciples who people thought he was. They responded that the crowds thought he might be John the Baptist, or the prophet Elijah, or maybe the return of some other ancient prophet. And then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Messiah of God!"

It was a great answer, but what was Peter's vision of who the Messiah of God would be? Jesus knows the disciples likely have a limited vision of who and what the Messiah will be like, so Jesus helps fill in their vision. He tells them how the Messiah will suffer, be rejected, and will be killed. This vision was a horrifying contradiction of everything the disciples had come to expect from the Messiah. This first portrait of Jesus would have been terribly distressing to his disciples.

But then, up on that mountain, a different vision of Jesus is revealed to Peter, and James, and John. This was a vision of Jesus transformed, standing in glory and light, conversing with two of the Jewish tradition's greatest leaders: Moses and Elijah. Those three disciples probably thought to themselves, "Now *this* is more like it! This is the kind of glory we expect from the Messiah." Peter even suggests they build some dwellings to prolong this great moment. But what they didn't yet realize is that this second revelation of Jesus' identity, this mountain top moment of shining glory, did not contradict the first revelation, the one about the suffering, the rejection, the death. This second revelation of light and glory only expanded and informed the vision of the first revelation of sacrifice.

God gives us a clue about what is going on in this mountain top revelation. God speaks up and says to the three disciples, "This is my Son, the Chosen," or as some translations read, "the Beloved." What is revealed up on that mountain was that Jesus was God's beloved. And that love transforms him, surrounds him in amazing light. What we see standing up on that mountain is a Jesus who is loved by God and who then lives out that love even at risk and sacrifice to himself. This is why and how those two revelations of Jesus are tightly connected. Jesus reveals God's love, God's sacrificial, unconditional, unwavering love, a love so deep it is even willing to undergo suffering.

What the disciples didn't know yet at that moment is that up there on that mountain, that revelation of who Jesus truly was offered them a vision of who they truly were. The Transfiguration enables us to more clearly see who we are.

Learning who we are also comes eight days prior to the Transfiguration. After Jesus tells the disciples that the Messiah will suffer, be rejected, and killed, he then tells them something disturbing about themselves. He says to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." Jesus reveals to his followers, to those early disciples and to us modern disciples, who we are: we are those who follow him on that path of love. This is not a warm, sentimental love, but a love rooted in a steadfast commitment toward the welfare of others. When Jesus then goes up that mountain of revelation, we discover that whatever glory we seek in life is found in following the man of God's love. Gazing upon Jesus bathed in God's glory, we discover ourselves. We too are God's beloved. And we too shine God's glory whenever we live out that love, whatever the risks or hardships that may follow.

The mountain top vision of Jesus as God's beloved bathed in light and glory would have been a very different from the image we see of him down in the valley. Down in the valley, Jesus faced rejection, hostility, and misunderstanding. Down in the valley, people wanted him dead. My former preaching professor Tom Long reflects that the earliest Christians, reading this story, would have easily related to the Jesus of the valley. He states that, "If Jesus' ministry experienced rejection, failure, and violence, so did theirs. Down in their own valley, all they could see was their life and hope slipping away. But up on that mountain they could see themselves in Jesus' light. They could see their own baptismal garments dazzling like the sun,

see the cloud of God's care over them, hear God calling them 'beloved.' Once again they could trust the promise that 'those who lose their life for my sake . . . will save it.'" He adds, "And so it is for us. Sometimes nothing is more discouraging than ministry in the messy middle of things. Trying to speak a word of peace in a war-mad world. Trying to promise hope to a culture that mistrusts what it cannot grasp, that takes no checks, only cold cash. Down in the valley, it is often hard to see how ministry in Jesus' name can be sustained."

But then we are given the mountain of Transfiguration, a story that helps us to see a radically different vision. In the valley, we are bombarded on all sides by ugliness, hardships, cruelty, indifference. And sometimes this is all we can see about ourselves or our world. But up on the mountain we are offered a different revelation. In the light of Christ, we can see with great clarity who we are: people who shine in glory with the love of God.