

The First Reading is Psalm 99:1-9

- 1 The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!
The Lord sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
- 2 The Lord is great in Zion;
The Lord is exalted over all the peoples.
- 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is God!
- 4 Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
- 5 Extol the Lord our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is God!
- 6 Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.
- 7 The Lord spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.
- 8 O Lord our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
- 9 Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the Lord our God is holy.

The Word of God – Thanks be to God

Before I read our Gospel passage I want to give the passage some context. The Gospel reading will begin with these words, “Now about eight days after these sayings.” So, I think it is appropriate to tell you what sayings our text refers to. The first saying is Jesus foretelling us of his great suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to come. His next saying is not anymore comforting, for he says to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Jesus continues saying, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” Ominous words concerning their teacher’s future and a daunting invitation for their own lives – deny yourself, take up your cross, lose your life to save it. So, about eight days later Jesus gathered a few of his disciples, specifically Peter, James and John, and together they went up to the mountain to pray. Listen now for God’s word to us today from the Gospel of Luke.

The Second Reading is Luke 9:28-43a

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen.

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met Jesus. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes the man’s son, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹ Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² While the son’s man was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The Living Word of God – Thanks be to God.

The Message is entitled *Resolute Witnesses*

Have you ever been described as radiant? Maybe, on your wedding day, as a newly wed couple. Maybe, after a mountaintop experience at a church camp or retreat. Maybe, after an experience of great joy – a graduation, a birth, a promotion. I have a few recollections of when others declared that my countenance was radiant – as a graduate, as a bride, as a mom to be, just home from an experience of deep spiritual significance – a contemplative retreat, my pilgrimage to Israel. I imagine there were times in all of our lives when someone might have described our countenance as radiant.

Jesus had such an experience on the mountaintop. The text tells us that while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed. Peter, James and John noticed, even though they were weighed down with sleep. As Jesus transfigured, it was as if time and space collapsed, with the world becoming incandescent, for Jesus was seen engaging Israel’s two most prestigious figures in collegial conversation. Moses whose radiance was seen by the Israelites as he descended Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and Elijah, a renowned prophet, who heard God speak on a mountain from the stillness of sheer silence. Together, Moses and Elijah personified “the law and the prophets.” These three appeared in glory before the disciples, as they discussed Jesus’ departure. Now we might miss another link to Moses and the first exodus with the NRSV translation, because it translates as “departure” the Greek word “exodos.” Jesus’ death and resurrection, in the Greek, are seen as a new exodus modeled on the deliverance of God’s people from Egypt. God’s people move from the grip of death to new life.

This glorious luminous experience though stops as abruptly as it starts. And the first reaction of Peter is to memorialize it, “Master... let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” The desire to stay on the mountaintop or at the very least memorialize the experience is

great. When something extraordinary happens, we want to celebrate it. We want to remember it. Often, we even want to re-experience the glorious emotion again and again. I know the mementos I shared with the children this morning signifies wonderful mountaintop experiences in my life. Yet, to enshrine these experiences is to miss the point of these experiences.

Mountaintop experiences are not the goal or the destination. Mountaintop experiences merely prepare us for what comes next. That could be why God interrupts Peter while he was talking about memorializing the event. A cloud swallows Peter, James and John and from within the cloud comes an audible voice, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." In this moment Jesus' identity is spectacularly confirmed for Peter, James and John, yet these three are stunned silent. Often the reading of the transfiguration ends with their stunned silence. But, this year in the Gospel of Luke we read on.

Our reading this morning doesn't leave us on the mountaintop. It takes us down the mountain and into the midst of a great crowd. From within the crowd a man shouts loudly to get Jesus' attention. The man's son needs healing. The man shares that he had begged Jesus' disciples to heal his son, but Jesus' disciples were unable to do so. Jesus' response to this revelation was not patient or gentle, for he says according to Eugene Peterson's translation rather harshly, "What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this?" Or more succinctly according to the NRSV, "You faithless and perverse generation." Faithless and perverse are not words disciples of Jesus would want associated with them. Not then and certainly not now. None of us want to be told that we have no sense of God or no focus to our lives. We certainly don't want to be tagged as slow learners, faithless or perverse.

Jesus certainly doesn't need faithless or perverse witnesses. Jesus needs resolute witnesses who live daily what they have been taught by him. Resolute witnesses who will deny themselves and their own ego needs. Witnesses willing to take up their crosses, of loving others, even their enemies. Witnesses willing to lose their lives for the sake of God's reign in order to save them.

At this point in Luke's Gospel, it is clear that Jesus knows that Jerusalem and the cross lies in his future. He spoke of this with his disciples and then again with Moses and Elijah. Jesus knows the way forward will not be easy, but he wants his disciples to be prepared. God's imperative on the mountaintop to Peter, James and John is loud and clear, "Listen to Jesus!" Listen to Jesus' life and teachings. Listen and learn well how to follow in his ways, for he will be with you only a little while longer.

When we survey Luke's Gospel, we realize that to follow the way of Jesus is more than just professing our faith in Jesus. The stories that precede our passage speak to the way in which we are to live. That is, to follow the way of Jesus means, we are to bring a bit more of heaven to earth by the way we live.

We have to ask ourselves if our lives look anything like Jesus'. Are we healers? Are we concerned with the poor, the hungry, the grieving? Do we love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who have harmed us? Do we bring life out of places of death? Are we generous? Do we practice forgiveness and work towards reconciliation and justice? Are we known by our love?

If we are honest with ourselves, we all struggle to live what Jesus taught us. And our United Methodist brothers and sisters are struggling publicly this very week after their General Conference voted to affirm exclusion of their LGBTQ members from ordination and marriage. Although this decision was welcomed by 53% percent of the voting delegates, this decision also caused pain for the other 47%. As Rev. J.T. Greenleaf wrote, "The core of our life together in the Wesleyan communion has been guided by three General Rules. First: Do No Harm. Second: Do Good. Third: Attend to our spiritual life with God..."

The plan that passed in St. Louis doubles down on the harm that has been inflicted upon LGBTQ persons and their family members and loved ones who support them.” The Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist, which includes our United Methodist Church here in Redlands, produced a video in response to the decision and in it they said, “We will continue to be a home for all God’s people, gathered around a table of reconciliation and transformation.” Our own denomination has had a very similar season of difficulty and with our General Assembly decision of inclusion, some of our churches and members suffered pain and our denomination fractured. It is not easy to love others as steadfastly as God loves us. It is not easy to walk as Jesus walked among us. I share this issue because of concern for our United Methodist brothers and sisters in Christ, but also to note that this is just one of many issues that the whole Christian church has struggled with over the centuries.

As I reflected on the transfiguration this week, it is clear that when we lose focus as churches on the life and teachings of Jesus, for we often bear witness not to the Triune God most fully known to us through Jesus, but to a god of our own making, fear takes root and rules, walls and barriers of exclusion are erected keeping some out, and the decisions makers in. We’ve seen it again and again throughout the churches history.

That is why, I have challenged us to read through the Gospel of Luke, as well as the Book of Exodus, again this coming Lenten Season. For we must be immersed in God’s word to know God. We must wrestle with God’s word in light of the life and teachings of Jesus. If we don’t know our story, it will be hard for us to follow the way of Jesus.

Friends, I’ll be the first to admit that I do not always follow the way of Jesus. I struggle to be a healer, but instead I inflict injury knowingly or unknowingly. In my comfort, I often fail to be concerned for the poor, the hungry, the grieving. In my disagreement with others, I fail to love my enemies or pray for those who have harmed me. I am not always generous or forgiving either. Yet, every day I am given a new beginning and I have come to trust that the mountaintop experiences I am graced with will give me the strength to never stop working towards bringing the radiance, the beauty of heaven on earth.

I pray that the mountaintop experiences we are all graced with will prepare us to be resolute witnesses to the truth of God’s extravagant and steadfast love for all of humanity and creation.

Friends, God is love. Jesus is love incarnate – God with us. The Spirit among us is love enacted. “So,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world.” Let us resolutely bear witness with our very lives to the world God imagines for all of humanity and creation. Amen.