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“In the Valleys of Life”

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Luke 9: 28-36

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, a very significant observance in the faith story that we share. The story of the transfiguration of the Lord was well known in the ancient world, because it is found in three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. Do you realize how unusual that is, to find the same story in 3 Gospels? Consider how many stories essential to our faith that we find only in one Gospel: the story of the Good Samaritan—found only in Luke; the story of Mary and Martha—found only in Luke; the Parable of the Prodigal Son—found only in Luke; the story of Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in the night asking what he must do to inherit eternal life—found only in John; the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead—only in John.

So the fact that the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord is found in 3 of the Gospels tells you something. That tells you that this story was widely known, even considered common knowledge. It was essential information about Jesus, and clearly demonstrates his power and spiritual significance. It begins with Jesus taking Peter, James and John for a hike up a mountain. No sooner had they arrived, when Jesus was suddenly changed. He was transfigured before their very eyes. His clothing became a brilliant white, his face changed like a ghost, and then Moses and Elijah came down out of Heaven to be there with him. Can you imagine what Peter, James and John must have been thinking?

No sooner do they reach the summit, when suddenly Jesus turns into a Ghost and two men who had been dead for centuries, are there talking to him. Moses the great law-giver, paying respects to Jesus, the great law fulfiller. Elijah the great prophet bowing before Jesus, an even greater prophet. And then, to top it off, the voice of God comes out of a cloud saying, “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!”

It was truly a mountain top experience, in fact I suspect that is where the expression “mountain top experience” comes from. It was so wonderful that Peter, James and John do not want to leave and go back down the mountain at all. Peter even suggests that they build three little shrines right there, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah, turn it into a real attraction, inviting people up to see it.

But Jesus urges them not to tell a soul. They have to return to their ordinary lives acting as if this incredible thing never happened at all. Verse

37 says: “The next day when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met them and a man in the crowd called out for help.” And so, back down from this mountain top experience, Jesus begins his journey to the cross: “Jesus then set his face toward Jerusalem.” Down from the mountain, he’s instantly back in the real world, with endless demands, people wanting things from him, and the prospect of his impending death.

Isn’t that the way life is? Once in a great while you have a mountain top experience that you wish you could hang onto forever. Your life is changed, you fall in love, you accomplish something wonderful, a child is born, you have a perfect vacation, something brings you such joy and happiness that you never want it to end. But then you have to come back down from the mountain into the valleys of life, back into your day to day existence, and it can be disappointing when you do. I love to climb mountains, in fact my son and I have climbed ten 14,000 foot mountains over the years. But climbing them is not the problem. The problem is coming down. Oddly enough, it is always harder to come down. Because once the challenge is over, you are tired and sore, you’ve been to the mountaintop and you just want to be airlifted off the mountain. You know every twist and turn and difficulty of the trail ahead of you. It is drudgery coming back down.

Nevertheless, I am convinced, and I think the transfiguration teaches us, that real life is not only about what happens to us on mountaintops, as much as it is about what happens to us down in the valleys. While mountain top experiences are wonderful, they are not what life is all about. Real life is about relationships and responsibilities, commitments and obligations. It’s about listening and learning, and doing things you don’t really want to do. It is not always glamorous or even very exciting. But it is down in the valleys of life where relationships are built, suffering occurs and life is transformed.

In my life that has been the case, that growth has occurred in the valleys of life. In the valleys of death, illness, sadness, and pain. The valleys of humility and loss. Those low places have shaped me far more profoundly than even the most memorable mountain top experiences. The summits give you a glimpse of the promised land, and that keeps you going, but it is in the valleys of life that our character is formed and our attitudes transformed.

Cambridge Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking is so completely debilitated that he cannot speak. He is too weak to write, feed himself, or comb his hair. But he could say with absolute sincerity that before he became ill he had little or no

interest in life. He called it “pointless existence.” He did little work and drank far too much. Then he learned that he had ALS (Lou Gerhig’s Disease) and was expected to die within 2 years. He says that the effect of this diagnosis was to focus his attention and energy, and the result was completely positive. Now Hawking describes himself as much happier, more productive, and engaged in life. This disease transformed his attitude, and caused him to see the world very, very differently. How does a devastating illness becomes an impetus for redemption?

Indeed, it is in the valleys of life that we are transformed. That was clearly the case for John Newton, the man who wrote Amazing Grace, the most recorded song in human history. John Newton was a slave ship captain who delivered over 20,000 human beings into slavery. This was ironic because he himself was enslaved in Sierra Leone, where he had a near death experience. In 1748, Newton had a complete change of heart, and converted to Christianity. He wrote the song Amazing Grace, and later became a priest. He dedicated the remaining years of his life to the complete abolition of slavery. February is Black History Month, when we remember the long and painful ongoing struggle for equality for our black brothers and sisters. The song “Amazing Grace” has always been a cry of hope throughout the long struggle for civil rights all over the world.

Let’s watch.... (Video clip on the story of “Amazing Grace”)

But the story does not end there. John Newton himself had a life changing effect upon William Wilberforce, a member of the House of Commons who led Parliament in the effort to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. After 20 years of introducing legislation and talking about it, Wilberforce finally saw his Abolition Bill Passed by a large majority in 1807. Twenty six years later (and just 3 days before his death) slavery was completely abolished in all of the British colonies. Next week a first run movie called “Amazing Grace” will open in theaters all over the country, telling this incredible story of human and social transformation. It is a movie you do not want to miss because it offers a powerful testimony to the transforming power of God.

In honor of this year being the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain, some people are working to bring the issue of slavery to the forefront of our consciousness. Did you know that an estimated 27 million people are still enslaved in this world? It is inconceivable that 27 million human beings, over half of them children are enslaved in factories and sweat shops, in lives of prostitution and hard labor. They are held against their will, paid very little, if at all, and threatened with violence on a regular basis.

We can be a part of their transformation, a part of the amazing grace of God if we are willing to enter into the dark valleys of the human condition where our

brothers and sisters are suffering. There is a petition on the Welcome Desk in the hallway you can sign if you are interested in adding your voice to bring an end to human slavery in our time. There are situations in this world that are completely beyond our comprehension, where people are denied the most basic human rights, and suffering unspeakable things. We can be a part of their liberation and redemption.

I think that is what the Transfiguration of the Lord is all about: the knowledge that just as God was in Jesus in a uniquely powerful way, God continues to be at work in this world in and through his followers in a similar way. Jesus was so clearly God in the flesh, and the transfiguration proved that, and yet he deliberately chose to work with the marginalized, the suffering and afflicted. That knowledge should inspire us to enter into the dark valleys of human pain, and with God's help, work for the transformation of the world.

This week begins the Season of Lent, the season of reflection and introspection prior to Easter. This Wednesday evening we will have a special service of the committal of Ashes, as we begin this journey commemorating the last days Jesus spent upon the earth. During Lent this year we are going to go deeper into ourselves and think about the temptations of Christ, and the temptations we all face, as well. Lent begins immediately after the Transfiguration for a reason, so that we can remember that after he was transformed, after God says "This is my beloved son, listen to him!" after that stunning mountain top experience, Jesus immediately came back down to serve those who needed him. He went right down into the valleys of life, thinking of others even when his own death was looming on the horizon. Let us remember this man, who was surely the Son of God, came not to glorify himself, but to serve and save humankind.

We best honor him when we do the same.

Amen