

UP AND DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

LUKE 9:28-43A

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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There is a little app on my phone, in my computer, that I have over the last few years become heavily dependent upon. It's called "Reminders."

This little app tells me what to do every day. In it, goes everything that needs to be done. Emails that need to be sent, groceries that need to be picked up, tasks that need to be accomplished, conversations that need to be initiated, errands that need to be run, kids' forms that need to be printed or filled out... I even have it set to remind me to do my pushups each morning. ☺

Anything that might slip through the cracks, anything that my brain doesn't have the space to recall, anything that needs to be done that can't be trusted to the fragile and precarious functioning of my own unaided memory.

Which is pretty much everything.

So every day, this thing is beeping and buzzing at me. Every day, there is a number of uncompleted tasks hovering in this menacing little red circle that is one of the first things that I see when I look at my phone.

It's actually pretty annoying. But it's also very helpful. *Necessary* even.

Because I am a forgetter.

We are forgetters. To be human is to forget. We can't possibly remember everything that there is to be remembered, can't possibly remember every detail if only because our brains are small and our time is short.

We need reminders to *do* what needs *doing*, to *be* what needs *being* in the world.

What is true of every day life is true in the life of faith. We have a need in the Christian life for reminders.

Here, too, we are forgetters.

It's so easy to forget even some of our most basic and important convictions about who God is.

It's so easy for our image of God to be yanked around and shaped and molded by what we see and hear around us, rather than by the God we see revealed in Scripture and in the person of Jesus.

Maybe we watch American news and we see the way that God is used in the political squabbles of the powerful and the rich. And gradually, imperceptibly, our image of God can shift ever-so-slightly toward the tribal deity of nation-states and political interests, a pawn to be used in political games.

Or, it's possible to come across other understandings of God that people have in common discourse. Perhaps we spend a bit of time in the land of clichés and truisms that are thrown around online or in face-to-face conversation about God being a kind of micromanager in the sky, choosing which blessings and curses he will send to which people at which time...

And gradually, imperceptibly even, our view of God shifts, ever so slightly, to something like a mechanical blessing dispenser in the sky.

Or, maybe we travel in different circles and God is often used as little more than a placeholder for ethical convictions or as the one who lends legitimacy to our pet causes. Gradually, imperceptibly, our view of God shifts, and God becomes little more than an extension of ourselves and the things that make us feel good and meaningful in the world.

There are countless ways in which our vision of God can be pulled hither and yon by how God is talked about in public discourse.

So we have this *constant* need to keep coming back to Jesus... to keep coming back to the gospels... to keep coming back to these basic and foundational stories of who God is and who we are.

We have this need to constantly have our theologies—our visions of God—recalibrated by Jesus.

Transfiguration Sunday offers us a few of these crucial reminders about who God is.

And this reminder comes as we go both *up* and *down* the mountain.

Let's start at the top of the mountain.

What do we learn about who God is here? Well, let's move through the scene step by step.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John go to the top of a mountain to pray. While they are there, Jesus' face changes and his clothes become a dazzling white. This scene has echoes of Exodus 34 where Moses comes down another mountain (Mt. Sinai), face aglow from the divine presence.

Speaking of Moses, while Jesus' appearance is thus changing, Moses and Elijah show up!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Many scholars are of the opinion that Elijah and Moses stand as representatives of the two major portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Prophets and the Law. This scene links Jesus to the whole story of Israel

Then, a cloud comes overshadowing them all, and we hear this divine speech: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." This speech echoes the one that came at Jesus' baptism: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At the Transfiguration, there is the important addition of three words:

Listen to him.

And then, Moses and Elijah disappear leaving Jesus to stand alone at the top of the mountain. The symbolism is clear; the law and prophets are secondary to the Word of God in flesh, Jesus Christ.

At the top of the mountain, we have this miraculous and fascinating scene that encompasses the past, the present, and the future of Israel's story, but that clearly demonstrates that the story is all about Jesus.

What about when we make our way down the mountain?

What reminders are we offered here of who God is and how God operates?

Well, before we leave the top of the mountain, we should take note of one more thing. A conversation, actually.

Jesus, Moses, and Elijah did more than just hang out at the top of the mountain. They talked. And it's very interesting to note what they talked *about*.

Let's listen again to verses 30-31:

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and **were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**

After the Transfiguration, Jesus is described at "resolutely setting out for Jerusalem" (9:51).

From this point on, the gospel of Luke narrates a journey that will culminate in a Roman cross and an empty tomb. This is the "departure" that Jesus was talking with Elijah and Moses about on the top of the mountain.

It's fascinating to look at the Greek word that is translated "departure." The word is a familiar one. *Exodus*.

We could read the passage like this, "They appeared in glory and were speaking of his *exodus* which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

What does this mean?

We often use the word *exodus* to refer to mass movements of people from one place to another. The word has often been used to refer to masses of people fleeing war in places like Syria (right now, there is an “exodus” of as many as 35 000 people fleeing Aleppo toward Turkey after heavy bombing in the region).

But in the biblical narrative, the word “exodus” obviously harkens back to the *story* of Exodus. It’s a familiar story—Moses leads the people of Israel out of dehumanizing bondage and slavery in Egypt, away from the cruel clutches of Pharaoh, through the desert, through the Red Sea, and into the promised land.

It is a story of deliverance from oppression. A story of freedom from captivity. A story of God liberating his people, accomplishing for them what they could not accomplish for themselves.

So, at the top of the mountain, Jesus talks about the *exodus* he will accomplish in Jerusalem, on a cross, where he will die in his people’s place, absorbing their sin into his own body, demonstrating what sacrificial love looks like, and opening the door to new life.

Just like Jesus was demonstrated to be both *like* and *more than* the prophet Moses, so his *exodus* will be *like* but *more than* the exodus of Moses.

This exodus will liberate people from more than just political oppression and slavery. This exodus will liberate people physically, spiritually, relationally—it will set us free from the sin and suffering that oppresses us, from the chains that keep us bound to that which destroys and degrades us.

The first exodus was a physical exodus from a physical place. The second exodus leads people out of spiritual bondage into the kingdom of heaven.

So, with this conversation about an *exodus* in mind, let’s look at the bottom of the mountain. No sooner has this glorious scene of transfiguration happened, when Jesus is back down among the people.

A great crowd meets him. A man shouts, “Jesus, please, my son, my only child! A spirit seizes him and he convulses! **It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.**”

Jesus looks around at the scene.

Perhaps his thoughts return to the top of the mountain.

Perhaps he looks ahead to what he knows is coming in Jerusalem.

Perhaps he sees the spiritual forces at work in the world that resist the kingdom of peace in countless ways.

Perhaps he sees the vast human canopy of suffering and sadness, the countless ways in which we destroy ourselves and others with patterns of sin and destruction.

Perhaps in this one interaction, Jesus sees every obstacle that ever has and ever will be in the way of his kingdom coming on earth as in heaven.

Whatever he sees, whatever he is thinking at this moment, his response is surprisingly abrupt. Angry, even.

“You unbelieving and perverse generation...how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?”

But these harsh-sounding words are followed by more other words: “Bring your son here.”

And then, Jesus does what Jesus does.

Exodus.

Deliverance from oppression. Liberation from bondage. Freedom from captivity. The opening of a door to new life.

He heals the boy and gives him back to his father. And all were amazed at the greatness of God.

At the bottom of the mountain, we see a foretaste of this great *exodus* that Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah about. We are reminded that the glorious Jesus of the shining face and the dazzling white, the Jesus who stands alone as God’s final word on

the top of the mountain, is the one who dives headfirst into human depravity and sin and suffering, and drags his people along to freedom.

The view from the top of the mountain is glorious. But the view from the bottom is glorious, too.

Both are good places to be amazed at the greatness of God.

And so what do we take away from this trip up and down the mountain?

I want to end with two basic reminders as we make our way out into the week ahead, as we transition from the season of Epiphany to Lent which begins on Wednesday.

The first is the one that came from the divine speech. *Listen to him.*

Listen to Jesus. Listen to his *words* and listen to his *life!*

Listen to his teaching, to his example, to his patterns of love and mercy, to his path of sacrifice and compassion, to his nonviolence and love of enemies, to his death, resurrection, and future return.

Let all of who Jesus *is* and all of what he has done and all of what he *will do* become what Jeffrey Tribble calls “the defining script for our local performances of the gospel.”¹

Listen to him. This Jesus who goes up and down the mountain is *what God looks like.*

I like how N.T. Wright puts it:

If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what grief is, look at Jesus. And keep looking until you’re no longer a spectator, but part of his grand story.²

¹ Jeffrey L. Tribble, Sr., “Pastoral Perspective on Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)” in *Feasting*

² <http://www.jeffkclarke.com/videos/n-t-wright-look-at-jesus/>

The second reminder is the liberating truth that it is *Jesus* who accomplishes what we can never accomplish for ourselves.

In talking about the evil spirit that had seized his son, the father said to Jesus, “It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.” As I read these words, I thought about the many destructive habits that so many in our world are bound to.

Whether it’s alcohol or drugs or pornography or money or status or dysfunctional patterns of relationship or toxic habits with respect to technology or entertainment, or any of the countless things that we are enslaved to, how often do these words apply?

It scarcely ever leaves... and it is destroying them!

How many people in our world and in our churches are familiar with this pattern of leaving and returning and leaving and returning, over and over again, to these things which are corrosive to our souls and destructive in our relationships with God, with others, and with ourselves?

For some of us, it takes a very long time to realize that *exodus* is a God-sized task.

Ultimately, the freedom we seek, the deliverance we long for is not something we can accomplish. Even if we manage to attain smaller victories, by the grace of God and through our own will, the final liberation from death that we long for is beyond our ability to achieve.

And so we are to be *exodus* people—people who cling to the way of Jesus as *he* drags us from bondage to the freedom of new life, in this life and in the next.

Thank God that the One who meets us at the bottom of the mountain is also the One who will take us to the top; thank God that the One who meets us in the muck and mire of everyday life is also the One who will bring many sons and daughters to glory, in the last great *exodus* to freedom, to light, and to life.

Amen.

