

Engage Bible Study: Luke 9:18-62 – Revelation and Transfiguration December 5-7, 2011

If you've ever taken a long hike you'll know that somewhere around the middle of the journey that little voice inside your head starts to ask, "Are we there yet?" I've found that that's a great time to pause and look back at how far you've come. We're not exactly halfway through Luke's gospel yet, but this would be a really good time to look back and see how far we've come.

We started this journey all the way back at the experience of Zechariah in the temple. Remember that? A barren old couple receives the outrageous word of promise that they would bear a son and this son of theirs would play a crucial role in God's salvation plan. And then we encountered a teenaged girl in an obscure little town, engaged to a carpenter. She, too, receives the outrageous news that though she is a virgin she will bear a child, and this child will be the Son of God. And now we've seen both of these promises come to fruition, though Zechariah and Elizabeth's child has already come to a tragic end. Jesus, however, has lived up to everything that Gabriel, Simeon and Anna said about him.

At the age of 30 Jesus began his public ministry by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and to back up that claim Jesus has healed the sick, exorcised demons and raised the dead with a word that carries the authority and power of God. Word about Jesus has spread far and wide. Massive crowds follow him and seek him out. Jesus is like a political candidate who is running away with a double-digit lead in all the polls. His election as Messiah seems certain. But as word reaches King Herod Luke foreshadows the reality that this story will not end as we might think. In the section we'll read today that reality will become all the clearer.

Confession and Foretelling (9:18-22)

Let's pick up the story in Luke 9:18-22 **[READ]**. If you remember from last week I said that the core question that weaves like a golden thread through the tapestry of Luke's gospel is, "Who is this". It's the question of Jesus' identity, and Luke wants to confess that Jesus is the Messiah whose power will be seen in loving service and sacrifice, contrary to the expectations of the Israelites. If you think the gospel of Luke as if it were a mountain we could say that for the past thirteen weeks...the first 9 chapters of Luke's gospel, we've been climbing. Jesus has been steadily rising in popularity. The people love him. But today we're beginning the journey downward, a journey that will lead to the cross. At the pinnacle of this mountain in Luke's gospel...and in all the gospels for that matter...is Peter's confession. The moment that Peter, who is the spokesperson for the disciples, recognizes and confesses Jesus as the Messiah we begin a very steep descent into persecution and eventually crucifixion.

Notice that Luke frames this story within Jesus' prayer life. Virtually every critical moment in Jesus' life in Luke's gospel – from baptism to the choosing of the twelve – has happened in the framework of Jesus' prayer life. Twice before we've heard the question asked regarding Jesus, "Who is this" and have not received an answer. So Jesus first asks the disciples what the people are saying, and Jesus is given the same rumors that Herod had been given: John the Baptist,

Elijah or one of the prophets. Essentially the crowds think Jesus is the promised forerunner of the Messiah. The very last words of Malachi the prophet, in fact the very last words of the entire Old Testament, are these, *“Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”* (Malachi 4:5-6). This is where the idea comes that a forerunner like the prophet Elijah would precede the Messiah. But that’s not what Peter believes. Peter confesses that Jesus is not the forerunner of the Messiah, he *is* the Messiah.

But now that the cat is out of the bag Jesus must reorient the disciples’ expectations about what the Messiah has come to do. You’ll remember that John the Baptist was confused about that, which is why he sent disciples to Jesus to ask “Are you the one or are we to wait for another?” Jesus tells his disciples that God’s Messiah has come to be rejected by the religious authorities, to be executed and then to rise again. And all of this Jesus “must” do because it is God’s will. I suspect that the idea of the Messiah being executed was so radically outside their expectations that they barely heard about the rising again. And Jesus sternly ordered the disciples to tell no one so that the events themselves...his death and resurrection... would reveal what God’s Messiah came to do and how it would be accomplished.

The Demands of Discipleship (9:23-27)

But Jesus words don’t just lay out the pathway for the Messiah. They have implications for the disciples. Let’s read 9:23-27 [READ]. While it’s possible that Jesus said these words to the twelve disciples right after Peter’s confession, it isn’t likely. Talking about a cross at this point would have meant nothing to the disciples. It is more likely that Luke put these words of Jesus here for Theophilus and therefore for all who read Luke’s gospel. Living on this side of Jesus’ death and resurrection these words of the cross do make sense.

If disciples are going to follow THIS Messiah they, too, must walk a path of self-denial and take up their cross daily. Of all the gospel writers Luke is the only one who adds the word “daily” here, which changes the meaning from martyrdom to sacrificial living. Luke expresses Jesus’ call as putting God’s agenda ahead of our own self-focused agenda. Which raises the question, what is our “cross”? In this context our cross is a life of self-denial for the sake of furthering God’s Kingdom. Some Christians talk about physical challenges or life’s hardships as “the cross I have to bear”. But those aren’t the things Jesus is talking about. We pick up our cross whenever we consciously, voluntarily choose to put our wants or needs behind God’s call to serve. Putting our lives or interests first (“saving your life”), focusing on gaining the whole world (money, power, status...all of which our ego craves) - these things are in direct contradiction to the call of discipleship. We can’t live that way and walk the way of discipleship any more than we can walk both north and south at the same time. To do so would be to deny Jesus and to miss the blessings of living in the Kingdom of God where real life is found.

Jesus’ final words in this passage are enigmatic. What does Jesus mean when he says, “But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” The answer actually lies in the very next story.

The Transfiguration (9:28-36)

Let's read 9:28-36 [READ]. In order to understand the meaning of this story we need to understand how Luke connects it with a few other stories. First, Luke intends the reader to hear in the story of the Transfiguration echoes of Moses on the mountain. In Exodus 24 Moses goes up on the mountain, God appears in a cloud and Moses' face is so transformed that he must wear a veil when he returns to the people. Second, you may recall back in Luke 3 Jesus was in prayer when he was baptized and the heavens opened and a voice declared "You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well-pleased." Against the background of those two stories the meaning of the Transfiguration comes to light.

- First, Jesus is changed in appearance. The disciples are given a glimpse of Jesus glorified, his kingship revealed. So when Jesus says in verse 27, "Some standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God" he is referring to Peter, James and John who behold Jesus in his glory on the mountain.
- Second, notice who appears with Jesus: Moses and Elijah. Why these two prophets? Moses is the lawgiver, but Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. Elijah is the prophet who announces the coming of the New Age and Jesus ushers in that New Age. And notice what these three are talking about: Jesus' departure. The literal Greek there is Jesus' "exodus" which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. In other words they are discussing his death.
- Third, Peter offers to build three shelters for these three figures. Why does he do that? Peter has in mind the Feast of Booths, sometimes called the Feast of Tabernacles, which was an annual celebration to remember the Exodus. The people built temporary shelters and lived in them for seven days to remember their nomadic existence during their forty days of wilderness wandering, and to remember God's provision. This feast also looked forward to the end times when God would lead the Israelites back to their former glory. Peter rightly understands that Moses and Elijah represent hope and the promise of fulfillment, but his mistake is in ranking all three of these figures equally. He wants to build them each a booth or shelter. But they are not equal. Jesus trumps them, which is why Luke says that Peter didn't know what he was talking about.
- The cloud which envelopes them represents God's presence and glory, in much the same way that God revealed his presence through a pillar of cloud during the Exodus. And what God says here is quite similar to what God said back at Jesus' baptism but with one major addition, "my chosen."

Remember that Jesus has just revealed to his disciples that he is indeed the Messiah, but that his chosen path will lead him to be rejected and executed. God's words affirm Jesus and essentially put God's stamp of approval on the mission that Jesus has articulated. Jesus didn't just make this stuff up. And though this pathway does not line up with the expectations of the people, it is God's will and God's plan. And so God says to the disciples about Jesus, "Listen to him." In other words, lay aside your expectations, listen to what Jesus is telling you and follow. And that's why Luke places this story where he does. It is a powerful affirmation of the surprising path that this surprising Messiah will take to save the world from sin and death.

The Not-Yet-Ready Disciples (9:37-50)

While the story of the Transfiguration leaves no question about Jesus' identity, it does leave questions about the disciples. Will they listen to Jesus? Will they follow him? Do they have enough faith to walk with him? They have now been confronted with some challenging words about Jesus' path and their own pathway as disciples. What will that mean for them? The four vignettes in this next section are connected by that central question. Let's read 9:37-50, and pay particular attention to what they say about the disciples [**READ**]. While Jesus, Peter, James and John were on the mountain lots had been happening among the other disciples, including a man whose son was demon possessed, but for some reason the disciples could not exorcise the demon...even though Jesus had given them power and authority to do so. While we're not told why they couldn't exorcise this demon Jesus' words imply that they didn't have enough faith. They are not yet ready to do this ministry on their own.

While the crowd marvels over Jesus' power over demons Jesus tells the disciples a second time that he will be betrayed into human hands. You can imagine just how confused the disciples would have been. On the one hand they have just seen Jesus' power to cast out demons and on the other hand they hear Jesus telling them that he will be so powerless as to be betrayed into human hands. The disciples simply have no way of holding these two things together. To be more precise it has not yet been revealed to them how these two opposing things are possible, but it won't be long before it will be revealed. So, the disciples lack both faith and understanding.

The third vignette in this section reveals that the disciples also lack humility. While Jesus is beginning to reveal that he will be betrayed and executed the disciples still have visions of power and glory and so they argue over who will be the greatest among them. Perhaps Peter, James and John have shared their experience on the mountain and are claiming that they pull rank on the other disciples. Who knows? What we do know is that their argument over greatness is totally out of sync with Jesus' call to discipleship. And so Jesus uses a child to illustrate kingdom living. Notice he doesn't call the disciples to become like children. He's talking about hospitality. Everyone wants to host a great or popular person, but Christ-followers willingly welcome the least in society as if they were welcoming Jesus himself. In God's kingdom economy the very people that the world considers "least" are considered "great". So, the disciples lack faith, understanding and humility.

Finally, in the fourth and final vignette Luke reveals that the disciples also lack the inclusive perspective of Jesus. It seems that there were others outside of the twelve disciples who had enough faith to cast out demons in Jesus' name. That might mean that they are literally using the name "Jesus" but "name" can also refer to the character of a person. For instance, when we're told to pray in Jesus' name that doesn't mean that saying the phrase "in Jesus' name" has some kind of magic power that makes your prayers come true. To pray in Jesus' name means to pray in alignment with the heart and mind of Jesus. Perhaps that's what it means that people were casting out demons in Jesus' name. In any event the disciples didn't think that there should be any unapproved "Jesus-franchises" out there, only those that they recognized. Jesus, however, is more interested in the heart and intention than the details. If kingdom work is

being done then whether these exorcists are following Jesus with the disciples doesn't really matter. They are all working to the same end. That's good enough for Jesus and it should be enough for the disciples.

Luke's point in these vignettes is not to make the disciples look bad. The point is this: the time of Jesus' departure, of Jesus' execution, is coming sooner rather than later. The day that this mission and ministry will be handed over to the disciples is coming quickly. But at this point the disciples are not ready. They lack the faith, understanding, humility and inclusive perspective to take matters into their own hands. They still have much to learn from Jesus in the days ahead.

Passing through Samaria (9:51-56)

I said earlier that with this section of Luke we've hit the top of the mountain and will soon head down the other side toward Jerusalem, toward crucifixion. That movement begins with these next verses, 9:51-56 [READ]. Jesus knows that his days are numbered, and that he will be "taken up", a phrase that Luke will use in Acts to refer to the ascension. In a sense that phrase points us toward the consummation of Jesus earthly ministry but it also reminds us again that the time will come soon when the disciples will be left to do Jesus' mission and ministry...and as we've just learned, they aren't ready yet...so this heightens the tension. Luke also tells us that Jesus "set his face" toward Jerusalem. That phrase connects Jesus to Isaiah 50 where we're told that the suffering servant would "set his face" like a flint as he walks toward the shame that is ahead. The journey to Jerusalem has now officially begun, though Jesus will not set foot into the city until chapter 19.

Jesus plans to go through the territory of the Samaritans and he sends two disciples to secure hospitality for them. Jesus has worked among the Jews and the Gentiles, but now he intends to work among the despised half-breed heathens. The Samaritans, however, want nothing to do with him because he is headed to Jerusalem. That could mean that they want nothing to do with anyone headed into the heart of Judaism...which would be an expression of their mutual hatred for the Jews. Or it could refer to the fact that they want nothing to do with a Messiah that is bent on suffering and death. Either way, the Samaritans want nothing to do with Jesus and his disciples and so they refuse them hospitality.

And I just love the response of James and John, "Hey boss, do you want that we should break their knee caps?" OK, actually they offer to bring down fire upon the Samaritans to consume them. Interesting that not long ago they didn't have enough faith to exorcise a demon but here they have enough confidence to call down fire just like Elijah did long ago. It seems that the disciples have already forgotten Jesus' instructions about what to do when people reject you and won't offer you hospitality. Do you remember what the disciples should do? That's right...shake the dust off of their feet. Retaliation and retribution are not an option for disciples. Mercy and forgiveness, loving our enemy, is the call of discipleship. This is just one example of what it means to take up our cross daily...to set aside our desire for revenge and freely forgive. It's easier said than done, and requires us to lean on the power of God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. So, as the journey to the cross begins Jesus teaches the disciples about the shape of discipleship, and that shape is self-denial.

Would-be Followers (9:57-62)

That same theme carries into this final story for today. Let's read 9:57-62 [READ]. "Following" is the theme of this passage, and specifically what it means to follow Jesus. In broad terms Jesus has already told the disciples that to follow him means self-denial but now he spells it out with more detail. Normally following a Rabbi meant to simply physically follow him and learn from him. Following Jesus, however, is a higher calling and lays a greater claim upon a disciples' life. Home, family relationships and family responsibilities all take a back seat to the responsibility of following Jesus. These requirements would have sounded harsh to these Jewish disciples, and they certainly sound harsh to us. Oddly enough many in the Christian Church in America have made family the highest calling of the Christian life. We hear all sorts of Christian leaders cry out about "family values" but the family that matters to Jesus is the family of faith. Familial relationships take second place in the kingdom of God. That doesn't mean that we aren't called to love our families, but it does mean that if push comes to shove, loyalty to Jesus and his agenda takes precedence. The closer Jesus gets to the cross, the greater the demands that Jesus reveals regarding discipleship.

Conclusion

One of the fastest growing movements in the world today is called "the prosperity gospel." Defined in its simplest form the prosperity gospel teaches that faithfulness and obedience will lead to the blessings of wealth and power and health. Not only is this movement growing in African, Central and South America, it's also alive and well in America Christianity...even in subtle forms. But today's passage blows that theology out of the water. Far from a life of ease and prosperity the call of the gospel, the call of discipleship is a hard road that will lead to hardship, but it also leads to blessings that this world can't identify with. It leads to peace in a world of striving. It leads to real security in a world that stakes its security on things that are easily moved. It leads to joy in a world that is willing to settle for happiness. It offers a life of real meaning in a world that offers fifteen minutes of fame. So, here are some questions worth reflecting upon:

- How does your idea of discipleship line up with Jesus?
- In what ways are you living a life of self-denial and cross-bearing?
- Are you experiencing the peace that comes from following Jesus, or is your life marked with worry, anxiety and striving?
- What do you need from God to help you to truly follow Jesus?