

Sermon Text for February 7, 2016

by Rev. Steven Clark

Luke 9 : 28-36

“A Different Kind of Glory”

MOVE ONE: WALKING WITH JESUS

The thing about walking with Jesus, you never know where he'll take you. Up a mountain to glimpse glory and heroes. Down in the valley to encounter a frustrated family, ineffective ministry, a really annoyed Jesus—and eventually a hill with a cross. When you walk with Jesus, you just never know where he'll take you. What you can be sure is that when you walk with him you will see in a new way God's glory and the world's brokenness.

Just over twenty years ago we became partners in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We shared many high moments. And many low ones. And everything in between. It was fun—sometimes. It was frustrating—sometimes. And everything in between. It was exciting and glowing, irritating and maddening. *That's how it is when we follow Jesus.* When we walk with him we see in a new way God's glory and the world's brokenness—including our own brokenness.

In the almost eight years since our journeys with Jesus led us apart, a lot has happened—for Jennie and me, and for you, I'm sure. Lots of change, struggle, learning, growing, pushing back vs learning, God insisting we grow and not letting up (*Dang!*). . . Some of it fun. Some of it frustrating. Some of it glorious and exciting, some of it unsettling and sad and confusing. Everything in between. *That's how it is when we follow Jesus.* When we walk with him we see in a new way God's glory and the world's brokenness—including our own brokenness.

MOVE TWO: A STORY OF TWO MOUNTAINS

As we approach the season of Lent we find ourselves on a mountain. As Lent ends, we'll be on a hill. *At the mountain we get the Jesus we really want, the savior we would design if we could:* glowing, heroic, schmoozing with great heroes of the faith. Lit up like a Vegas casino.

On the hill, we get the Jesus we weren't looking for: betrayed, abandoned, humiliated, bleeding, mocked, powerless, questioning God. A lamb led to the slaughter.

On the mountain we get a glimpse of the future, the glory that comes when all is well and complete and fulfilled. On the hill we get a glimpse of what the journey to that day can be like.

Now we can understand Peter and the boys wanting to hang around the mountain a bit, can't we? Set up tents, have a campfire, snap a few selfies. But *that's not what mountains are for*. Not this one. Not most mountaintops. Mountaintops are for celebration and joy, surely—but not nostalgia, and not for hiding from the hard stuff of life. They're for helping us see farther than we usually can, see things we miss when we're down in the valley, in the trenches . . .

Perhaps that's why just before the mountain, Jesus tries to tell the disciples what it means for him to be the Messiah—and what it means for anyone who follows him. And when they come down the mountain he tells them that the one they just saw in radiant glory, affirmed from heaven—they will soon see him trapped and helpless.

MOVE THREE: LIVING IN THE VALLEYS

Because we don't actually LIVE on the mountaintops, right? We live in the valleys, on the hillsides, along the seashore and riverbanks, across the plains. But not on the mountaintops. Even Jesus doesn't stay there; he quickly leads his disciples back down the mountainside . . . and into the midst of urgent human need and longing. [READ vv37-43]

Even Jesus, in all his glory as the Son of God, doesn't avoid the pain and brokenness that fills the world. How then can we, if we're really following him?

This rhythm, this never-ending tension, of two realities—the glory and the struggle—plays out in Jesus' own story, the story we remember and rehearse and re-enter every year in the church. Today we end the season of Epiphany. We began this season just after Christmas, meeting once again the magi—the “wise men,” as we often call them. We encounter, with them, a baby, humble and simple and helpless. But the story goes on and now we see the glory of Jesus, standing with Moses and Elijah, two great heroes in God's story with the world. But the glowing Jesus on the mountaintop will become the humiliated Jesus on the cross, crying out in pain to God.

And because that's really not the kind of savior we're looking for, it's all the more important that we pay attention to the rest of what happens on that mountain. That we not only SEE the glowing Jesus, but we HEAR the booming voice.

MOVE FOUR: LISTEN TO HIM!

“This is my son. My chosen one. Listen to him.” It’s not enough that we look at Jesus and wonder, or even that we worship, or that we confess faith in him. If he truly is Lord and Savior, then we will listen to him. We will pay attention to everything he tries to tell us—both in the words he speaks in Scripture, and in the promptings whispered to us by the Spirit. *Listen to him!*

Calling Jesus “Lord,” calling ourselves “Christians”, isn’t a matter of simply saying the right words, of claiming a particular doctrine. It means hearing what God says to us and doing our darndest to understand and do what he calls us to do. It’s about becoming the people he’s calling us to be, taking on the commitments he calls us to take on, setting the priorities he requires of us, living into the habits and disciplines he demonstrates and expects of those who would be his followers.

It’s no accident that on the way to the mountaintop, Jesus emphasizes the costly demands made on those who follow him: denying themselves, taking up their cross, losing their lives. In Luke’s story of Jesus, things are about to get really hairy, more tense than ever, filled with growing danger and threat. When the going gets tough, it will become harder to trust that Jesus knows what he’s doing. So they’ll need to remember that mountain, and the command from the cloud: “Listen to him!”

It’s a word for all of us, though; not just those on the mountain that day.

MOVE FIVE: NO HEROES, ONLY PEOPLE

Because if we read the Bible carefully and honestly, we discover that there are no real heroes in either the Old Testament or New. Nobody gets it all right, nobody comes off with clean hands or a clear record. Not a single human figure in the story is completely pure or infallible. In the story of God’s working in the world, there are only dysfunctional and fallible and fumbling people who do the best they know how—which often isn’t very good—to be faithful to God.

And that’s still true today.

On a few occasions in my years of ministry, when I’m feeling really frustrated, I’ll remark to a friend half-jokingly that the church would be a nicer place to be if it weren’t for the people. Of course, if I’m being honest that has to include me. (I have to wonder if God ever feels that way. Jesus seems to have had some of that feeling in the second scene in the text.)

I also feel very confident that if I could just take control and be in charge and do things my way, then we'd all be . . . in very, very, very deep . . . trouble.

Still God will not give up on us. Amazing, isn't it? Why would God use such broken people, who seem to have an endless capacity for breaking things, including each other and the world—why would God use people like that to be his church, to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven? Why pick folks like us?

And the answer's pretty simple, actually. What other kind of people are there except fallible and broken ones? Including you and me. All of us. People God keeps using for his healing purpose in the world. People God keeps calling. Keeps forgiving. Keeps empowering and guiding. And correcting. And forgiving. And using.

When Jesus is hanging bloodied on the cross he looks around him and prays, "Forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." *They don't know what they're doing.* And that describes all of us at one point or another, doesn't it?

And still, in the throes of despair and pain and humiliation, the Son of God cries out, I FORGIVE YOU! And when he's raised from death, he comes back to the very same people who abandoned him and denied him and says, "I've power to give you. And I've got work for you to do. And I'm with you. On the mountaintops. In the valleys. In the trenches. In the mud. In the good times and the bad, in the midst of harmony and in the midst of hardship, when you're confident and when you're confused, when you're getting along with each other and when you're not—in all of that, I'm with you."

When we walk with Jesus, we just never know where he'll take us. What we can be sure is that when we walk with him we will see in a new way God's glory and the world's brokenness.

*So may we, sisters and brothers, be people who walk with him, wherever he leads,
and as we walk in the way of Christ,
by the power of Christ,
in the presence of Christ,
being transformed by the Spirit of Christ,
may we, like those folks at the bottom of the mountain,
be blessed to witness (and be part of) Christ's healing work in the world,
and like them, be "astounded at the greatness of God."*

