

They Spoke about His Departure

Luke 9:28-36

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Jesus was on the mountain praying when the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. At the same time Moses and Elijah, two of the most important Old Testament figures appeared in their own glorious splendor, and the three of them were talking together. They were talking about his departure, or the departure of Jesus. The idea of them talking about the departure of Jesus is intriguing. The Old Testament has a wide variety of departures. Reading in Judges I came across the story of the angel who appears to a childless woman and promises that she will become pregnant and give birth to a son. The son to be born is Samson, quite an impressive Old Testament figure. Before we meet Samson we learn about the departure of the angel. Samson's father was making a burnt offering of grain. "As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame." (Judges 13:20) That angel had an impressive departure.

Do you remember the departure of Samson? He was the one of almost unlimited strength whose strength was tied to never cutting his hair. Unfortunately he told Delilah the secret of his strength and when his head was shaved his power vanished. His eyes were gouged out by his enemies and he was bound with bronze shackles and enslaved. While enslaved his hair grew and his strength returned. Samson's last act was an epic one. His captors wanted to taunt and tease him and make sport of him, so they brought him into the middle of the temple of their god. Samson put his hands on the pillars of the temple, offered a fervent prayer that God would strengthen him one more time, and then pushed with his last ounce of strength. The pillars gave way, the temple crashed to the ground, and Samson put to death more of his enemies with this last act than he did the whole time he was alive.

Moses and Elijah were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the face of Jesus changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Moses had a unique departure. It was not necessarily spectacular, but there is a serenity to it that is unmatched. Moses brought the people to the edge of the Promised Land but was not allowed to enter with the people. Instead, God led him up Mount Nebo where he could look out onto all the land spreading before the people. God allowed him to look and to see the fulfillment of his promise. There on Mount Nebo Moses died peacefully. Elijah, on the other hand, that prophet had a departure, full on with horses and a chariot of fire that appeared and whoosh, Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. So there they are, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they are talking about Jesus and his departure.

Before we find out what his departure will be like, we already know that as great and admired as Moses and Elijah were, they are not on par with Jesus. Before Jesus was born the angel told his mother Mary that the child who would be born would be great. He would be called the Son of the Most High God. He would be given the throne of his ancestor David. He would reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom would know no end. The shepherds out watching their flocks in the field heard the good news that a Savior had been born who would be Messiah. Indeed, Jesus would be Lord. At his baptism God spoke from heaven and said to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." When he preached in Nazareth Jesus took up the mantle of the prophet Isaiah who had spoken of one whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest on and who would usher in the age of Jubilee. When Jesus finished reading those words he said today those words have been fulfilled. So when he stands with Moses and Elijah, they are not in competition with him for being the greatest. They move off the stage leaving Jesus alone on the mountain. And once again God speaks from heaven and says, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

Jesus is greater than Samson and the angel who appeared to his mother, greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, and so whatever their departures were, whether peaceful or full of fireworks, you can be assured the departure of Jesus will be uniquely filled with purpose and meaning . His departure will make a statement for the ages and for all eternity. Indeed, if we read ahead to Acts chapter one we find out Jesus ascended into heaven right before the eyes of his disciples and they all were staring intently into heaven trying to grasp what exactly had happened.

But there is a twist in this story that is absolutely marvelous, so marvelous in fact that it is incredible. The twist doesn't have to do with the departure of Jesus that took him to heaven. It seems that when Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, the departure he was talking about was not his ascension into heaven. Instead, it was his departure from this on earth. It was the death he would die. It was the cross on which he would suffer. It was the crucifixion. That is a departure they were talking about. The humiliation of his death, the incredible irony that the Son of God, who we see so clearly on the Mountain blazing with glory would be put to a horrible death on the cross, is made that much more incredible because Jesus truly is God's Beloved Son. He truly is the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the one we heard exalted in our opening sentences, the one who reigns in glory and sits enthroned before the cherubim, before whom the earth shakes. That Jesus, that Lord of all creation, that Beloved Son of God, the very God of grace and the God of glory will have his departure through death on the cross.

On the Mount of Transfiguration the stage is perfectly set for Jesus to demonstrate upward mobility, to rise to glory and be transported beyond all of the suffering and sadness, all the evil and sinfulness of this world. But it is perhaps never more obvious what his mission was than on the Mount of Transfiguration. For it is on that Mountain that Jesus literally enacts his mission of downward mobility. He literally goes down the mountain. And he figuratively goes down the mountain. His journey is captured when Paul, using what many believe was a sacred hymn of the early church, tells of his journey downward in Philippians 2. "Jesus

Christ, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the very nature of servant. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) His departure was not a spectacular escape from this world. His departure embraced suffering, enacted servanthood, and embodied sacrificial giving.

Getting his departure right is of the utmost importance. Just before he made his way up the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23,24) If we follow Jesus up the Mountain expecting his departure to be an immediate ascension to heaven, removing him from the real life struggles of this earth, we misunderstand who Jesus is and what he came to do. If, on the other hand, we can grasp his departure as his complete embrace of this broken world, exemplified by giving his life in sacrifice and service, then our following of Jesus just might resemble the type of discipleship he intends for us.

A bit later in Luke 9 we will read that Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where his downward journey of suffering and humiliation will be completed. Jerusalem is where his departure will take place. Many have used this point in Luke, chapter 9 and verse 51, as a call for disciples of Jesus to join him as he sets his face toward Jerusalem. The call is given to set our faces toward Jerusalem and walk with Jesus on his journey.

For our community here at Dunn’s Corners, I extend the call to follow Jesus in a few particular ways as we enter the Season of Lent. Since we cannot transport ourselves back in time to literally follow Jesus on his journey, I extend the call to take up the gospel of Luke by reading 24 chapters in the days between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. There will be a daily reading guide which divides Luke into 40 daily readings. What happens when we slowly read God’s word, when we follow the footsteps of Jesus as they are laid out for us in Luke’s gospel?

I believe we encounter our Lord in deep and personal and profound ways. Scriptures are not magical documents, and yet they are the Word of God, and God uses his word to open our eyes, to let us see in new ways, to be challenged, to be encouraged, to be inspired, and to be equipped.

Along with daily readings, we learn from Jesus that prayer is a powerful part of our relationship with God. Our passage this morning in Luke 9 tells us that when Jesus went up the mountain he was praying. (9:29) Immediately before the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter proclaims that Jesus is God's Messiah, we are told Jesus was praying. It is also in that passage that Jesus tells his disciples to take up their cross daily and follow him. Just before he was proclaimed as Messiah he fed the 5,000. As he was feeding the multitude he took the bread and the fish and he gave thanks. He prayed. Over and over again Jesus prays. If we set our faces with him to Jerusalem, if we make this journey with him, let us be a people of prayer. Not long prayers. Not complicated prayers. Not prayers designed to impress others. Just prayer. Lord help me understand your word. Lord help me love others. Lord help me forgive. Lord help me to believe that you love me, that you forgive me, that you want to use me. Lord, help me today to follow you. Not long prayers. Not complicated prayers. Not impressive prayers. Just prayers between you and the God who knows you inside and out. Just prayers between you and the God who loves you.

The third thing I call upon you to practice this Season of Lent is being a servant. Rather than spell out the countless ways we can be servants, I simply encourage you to pay attention to Jesus as you read the Gospel of Luke. Do you want to find out what it means to be a servant? Walk with Jesus. See how he treats others, what he does, his attitude, his attentiveness to the needs of others, his desire to reach out to the least, the last, and the lost. And as you read and as you pray, ask Jesus how he might want you to be a servant today. Today is important. He says take up your cross daily. Somehow, some way, he wants us to be servants each and every day.

Jesus is setting his face toward Jerusalem. He goes before us and he calls us to follow. He didn't stay on the mountain, and he didn't ascend to heaven from the mountain. He came down from that mountain. He came down to meet the needs of this world face to face, hand to hand, and heart to heart. He came down so that he could make his departure, and in making his departure, to cover the brokenness of this world with the power of his love. Jesus is going ahead of us and he calls us to follow.

Even as we follow Jesus in this Season of Lent, our journey is more than simply following Jesus. Jesus not only leads us, he also is the one who walks with us, the one who lifts us, the one who carries us, the one who fills us, and the one who sustains us. He walks with us.

As I have been preparing for the Bible Study on the Gospel of Luke that I will be leading during Lent, I came across the word Anawim. Before I tell you what that word Anawim means, I have a confession to make. Anawim sounds very similar to Anakin, and I happened to be reading this right when the hype over the new Star Wars movie was at a fevered pitch. Anakin Skywalker was the name of Darth Vader before he became Darth Vader, and so even as I studied Luke's gospel the hype of Star Wars kept distracting me. The distraction included all the puns that are made using Star Wars names. In the hospital waiting for the doors to open so I could go up to the second floor and make a visit I imagined Darth being there as the doors opened and asking if I had met his sister Ella...Ella Vader. I found out there is already a Christmas musical for kids that taps into the Star Wars theme. "In a Galilee far, far away..." It seemed the Star Wars virus had affected my laptop when this one popped up: Which program do Jedi use to open a PDF file? Adobe Wan Kenobi. Only diehard fans might get this one, but with Valentine's Day drawing near Darth Vader offers his counsel on relationships. "If you are dating a girl who doesn't like Star Wars puns, you're looking for love in Alderaan places." The worst was reading at both his baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration that God says to Jesus in the gospel of Luke, "I am your Father."

I tell you these silly things by way of confessing that I am drawn to the hype and the spectacle and the drama of things like Star Wars. There is a part of me that wants to jump up every time I read the gospels and cry out show, “Show them Jesus.” Make a dramatic departure. Crush your enemies. Flex your muscles. Show us your glory. Take it up to hyper drive and break out your light saber.

But every time I read the gospel he does something different. His departure takes him down the mountain and deep into the valley of human life, with all of its suffering and sadness and rebellion and brokenness. He never gets confused between Anakin and Anawim. He keeps coming down, every single time to be with the Anawim, those who are described as the poor ones. In the gospel of Luke you will find Jesus reaching out to the least, the last, and the lost. He will show a special concern for the poor. Anawim includes the poor, just as Jesus did. And Anawim expands our understanding of the poor to embrace the poor ones, the ones who are totally dependent on God; the ones who found they could not trust in their own strength, so they have trusted in God; the lowly, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows, and the orphans; the refugees and the displaced; the ones who are barren and the ones who are broken; the humble and the heartbroken; the ones who are weeping and waiting...waiting...waiting. Waiting not for a God who stands high on a mountain far removed from the realities we face, but waiting for a God who comes down from the mountain and wraps this world in a great big hug. That God is here. His name is Jesus. He is coming down the mountain and setting his face toward Jerusalem. He is inviting each one here to take up your cross daily and follow him. And he is offering to take your hand, to fill your heart, to lift your burden, and to carry your load. All we have to do is say, “Oh come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee.”